



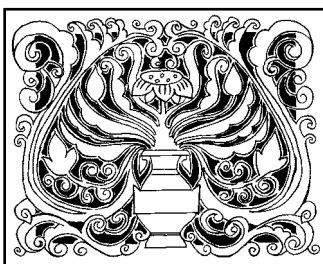
# PRABUDDHA BHARATA

or AWAKENED INDIA

A monthly journal of the Ramakrishna Order  
started by Swami Vivekananda in 1896

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# TRADITIONAL WISDOM

उत्तिष्ठत जाग्रत प्राप्य वरान्निबोधत । *Arise! Awake! And stop not till the goal is reached!*

## *Mother We Adore*

March 2008

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बङ्गक्षौण्यां रामचन्द्र द्विजातेर्धर्मक्षेत्रे लीलयैवावतीर्णाम् ।  
सत्यज्ञानानन्दवात्सल्यमूर्तिं नित्यं वन्दे मातरं शारदाख्याम् ॥

Born of her own will in the abode of the pious Ramachandra, in the holy land (of Jayrambati) in Bengal, the embodiment of truth, knowledge, bliss, and mother-love—that Mother called Sarada, I always adore.

देहासक्त्या क्लिश्यमानप्रपुंसां सुप्तं बोधं सम्यगुन्मीलयन्तीम् ।  
शोकं मोहं चाशु निर्मूलयन्तीं भक्त्या वन्दे मातरं शारदाख्याम् ॥

The awakener of the knowledge dormant within people troubled by their physical attachments, who speedily removes all sorrow and delusion—that Mother called Sarada, with devotion I adore.

मायासिन्धौ मज्जतः प्राणिवर्गान् प्रेमोदारेणात्मपादप्लवेन ।  
उद्धृत्य द्रागस्य पारं नयन्तीं मूर्ध्ना वन्दे मातरं शारदाख्याम् ॥

She who, out of her overflowing love, rescues living beings drowning in the ocean of maya with the raft of her [holy] feet and ferries them speedily across—that Mother called Sarada, with [bowed] head I adore.

तच्छब्दार्थश्चण्डिकेति प्रसिद्धश्छन्दोवासच्छादितो राजतीति ।  
पश्यन्नार्चद् रामकृष्णोऽपि यां तां दोर्भ्यां वन्दे मातरं शारदाख्याम् ॥

She who is denoted [in Vedanta] by the term tat, who is popularly known as Chandika, who appears clothed in the fabric of the Vedas, and seeing whom even Ramakrishna was moved to worship—that Mother called Sarada, with [folded] hands I adore.

रम्भादीनां स्वर्वधूनामधीशां राधादीनां मानुषीणामधीनाम् ।  
आर्तत्राणैर्कार्पितं स्वाखिलार्थां भूयो वन्दे मातरं शारदाख्याम् ॥

She who rules over divine damsels such as Rambha but is under [the sway of the divine love of] such humans as Radha, whose whole being is dedicated to the welfare of the suffering—that Mother called Sarada, again [and again] I adore.

—Ottur Unni Nambudiripad, *Vande Mataram*

# THIS MONTH

If Swami Vivekananda was Sri Ramakrishna's instrument in founding the Ramakrishna Order, Sri Sarada Devi—the Sangha Janani, Mother of the Order—embodies the power that guides and governs it. Her **Unfailing Wisdom** has also been a source of perennial inspiration.

Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi's personality was characterized by an 'extraordinary ordinariness' which often blinded one to her manifest divinity. Swami Sridharanandaji, Minister-in-Charge, Vedanta Centre of Sydney, discusses this in **The Holy Mother—Who Is She?**

Brought up as their own child, Bhavatarini Devi had occasion to be intimately associated with and personally trained by Sri Sarada Devi and Sri Ramakrishna. **Mother: As I Saw Her at Dakshineswar** is her recollection of her childhood days, which throws a fascinating light on Sri Sarada Devi's personality.



Swami Vivekananda had profound reverence for the spiritual acumen, courage, and sympathy manifest in the person of Gautama Buddha. He studied the development of Buddhism and critically analysed its strengths and weaknesses.

**Buddha in Swami Vivekananda's Eyes** is Swami Sandarshanandaji's study of Swamiji's thoughts on the subject. The author is a monastic member of the Ramakrishna Mission Vidyapith, Deoghar.

'The Song of the Sannyasin' is Swami Vivekananda's inspiring call to the challenge and joy of a life of renunciation. Swami Yogeshanandaji, Vedanta Cen-

ter of Atlanta, reflects on the meaning of the poem in **The Song of the Sannyasin: A Meditation.**

**Swami Vivekananda and Delsarte** explores the personality of Delsarte, the system of exercises he developed, and the reasons why Swami Vivekananda recommended these to his brother monks. The author, Dr Hema Murty, is an aerospace engineer from Toronto.



Sri Biswaranjan Sengupta of Kolkata delves into history to present some **Tributes in Verse to Swami Vivekananda by His Early Western Admirers.**

Swami Samarpananandaji, Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda University, Belur, concludes his reflections on **Sri Ramakrishna and Avatarahood** with an appraisal of the nature and purpose of the avatara and the ways in which he or she influences the course of human development.

In **Justice and Equality**, Dr Lekshmi Ramakrishnaiyer, Lecturer, Department of Philosophy, University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, examines some of the relevant meanings and shows how the concept of human divinity underscored by Swami Vivekananda provides a unique rationale for these values.

Sri Ramakrishna had a close relationship with many members of the Brahmo Samaj. Trailokyanath Dev was one member of the Samaj who used to visit Sri Ramakrishna. **Reminiscences of Sri Ramakrishna** is a selection from one of his writings. The text has been compiled and translated by Swami Chetanandaji, Minister-in-Charge, Vedanta Society of St Louis.

## EDITORIAL

# Unfailing Wisdom

THE life of Sri Saradamani Devi or the Holy Mother, as she is now known all over India and even abroad, is bereft of all those things which we are apt to consider great according to our present-day standards,' observed Swami Vireswarananda, a disciple of hers and tenth president of the Ramakrishna Order. 'Judged by the current standards, she looked like a common pious lady going round her daily routine household duties. Hers was a life of extreme simplicity devoid of all events and activities which attract one's attention. ... Friends of her childhood, whom many have seen, used to say, "We have lived with her from her very childhood, we played and mixed intimately with her, but we have never experienced anything supernatural about her. Today we are surprised to see so many devotees coming to her, a temple built in which she is installed as a deity, and what not. Who knows what all this means!"'

That Sri Sarada Devi's childhood playmates did not notice anything out of the ordinary in her behaviour should not surprise us; Swami Vivekananda had himself written to his illustrious brother disciple, Swami Shivananda, in 1894: 'You have not yet understood the wonderful significance of Mother's life—none of you. But gradually you will know. Without Shakti (Power) there is no regeneration for the world. Why is it that our country is the weakest and the most backward of all countries?—Because Shakti is held in dishonour there. Mother has been born to revive that wonderful Shakti in India; and making her the nucleus, once more will Gargis and Maitreya be born into the world. Dear brother, you understand little now, but by degrees you will come to know it all.'

That Sri Sarada Devi wielded exceptional power was apparent to such discerning observers as Sister Nivedita: 'Sri Ramakrishna always consulted her

before undertaking anything and her advice is always acted upon by his disciples ... whatever her wish is, it is their command. ... She really is, under the simplest, most unassuming guise, one of the strongest and greatest of women.'

Sri Sarada Devi conceived of the physical existence of the Ramakrishna Order at a time when few had any idea of the shape that it was to take. She later recalled: 'Ah! For this, how I shed tears and prayed to the Master! And only then, through his grace has come into existence today the Math (monastery). When the Master left his body, the boys gave up the world and gathered together round a (rented) shelter for some days. Then they scattered about independently and went on roaming about here and there. Then I felt intensely sad and prayed thus to the Master, "Master, you came, played and disported with these few and then went away; and should everything end with that? If so, where was the need for coming down in the midst of so much sorrow? ... My prayer is, that those who leave the world in your name may never be in need of bare subsistence. They will all live together holding to your ideas and ideals; and the people afflicted with the worries of the world will resort to them and be solaced by hearing about you."'

Swami Vivekananda would devotedly recall Sri Sarada Devi's insight into and support for the mission that was then unfolding: 'Then came the sad day when our old teacher died. ... We had no friends. Who would listen to a few boys, with their crank notions? Nobody. At least, in India, boys are nobodies. Just think of it—a dozen boys, telling people vast, big ideas, saying they are determined to work these ideas out in life. Why, everybody laughed. From laughter it became serious; it became persecution. ...

'Then came a terrible time—for me person-

ally and for all the other boys as well. ... I had to stand between my two worlds. On the one hand, I would have to see my mother and brothers starve unto death; on the other, I had believed that this man's [Sri Ramakrishna's] ideas were for the good of India and the world, and had to be preached and worked out. ... Oh, the agony of those days! ... Who would sympathise with the imaginations of a boy—imaginations that caused so much suffering to others? Who would sympathise with me? None—except one.

'That one's sympathy brought blessing and hope.' And that one was Sri Sarada Devi.

It was therefore meet that Swamiji turned to her for blessings before setting out as a *parivrajaka* (wandering monk), and embarked on his voyage to the West only after she had granted her permission.

Swami Saradananda, Sri Sarada Devi's devoted attendant and the first general secretary of the Ramakrishna Order, noted that Swamiji would turn to Holy Mother for advice whenever there was a difference of opinion with regard to the policies and programmes of the Order. Holy Mother would promptly provide a solution to every problem; and everyone would accept her cogent solutions without the least hesitation. 'I have never known her hesitate in giving utterance to large and generous judgement however new or complex might be the question put before her,' writes Sister Nivedita.

At a time when a large body of social opinion was against monks involving themselves physically in service activities, Holy Mother had no doubts about the efficacy of such work: 'How many can do japa and meditation all the time?' she asked, 'Far better is it to work than to let the mind loose to indulge in riotous thinking. If the mind is allowed a little laxity, it will create such a turmoil. My Naren [Swami Vivekananda] observed all this and so laid down the foundation of selfless work.' Seeing the service of the Ramakrishna Mission Home of Service at Varanasi she said, 'I saw the Master [Sri Ramakrishna] himself present there, and that is why this work goes on here. These are all his work.'

The above examples should not be taken to

mean that Sri Sarada Devi was unquestioningly supportive of all that Swami Vivekananda did. Swami Saradananda observed, 'Holy Mother would often rein in Swamiji's great urge for work. During the plague epidemic in Calcutta, Swamiji started relief works with the help of Nivedita and others. But as the volume of work began to increase by the day and commensurate funds were difficult to come by, Swamiji was perturbed; finally he expressed the wish to sell the [newly acquired] Belur Math property to ensure continuation of the relief services. When he mentioned this to Sri Sarada Devi, she said immediately, "How can that be, my son, how can you sell the Belur Math? The resolve to establish the Math was taken in my name, and it has been dedicated to Sri Ramakrishna; where then do you have the right to sell it?" She added, "Is the purpose of the Belur Math to be exhausted with a solitary act of service? It has so much more to do. The countless ideas manifested by Sri Ramakrishna will be scattered all over the world. This will continue for ages." Swamiji said in an embarrassed tone, "Indeed, what was I going to do under the sway of emotion! It is very true that I cannot sell the Math; I do not have that right. Raja (Swami Brahmananda) has been appointed the president of the Math, and Sarat (Swami Saradananda) the secretary. What right do I have [to decide about its future]? I had completely forgotten this fact!"'

Again, when Swamiji resolved to perform Durga Puja at Belur Math according to traditional scriptural injunctions, including an animal sacrifice, *bali*, Holy Mother said, 'Sure, my son, you must surely worship Shakti by performing Durga Puja at the Math. Can any task be accomplished in this world unless Shakti is worshipped? But my son, do not perform *bali*; do not kill an animal. You are sannyasins; granting freedom from fear to all is your vow.' Swamiji complied. He had, therefore, good reason to say, 'Mother is the incarnation of Bagala in the guise of Saraswati. Outwardly she is all peace, but inwardly she is the destroyer of the power of evil.' Also, 'She is the protector, the nourisher, and the mother of the [Ramakrishna] Sangha.'



# The Holy Mother—Who Is She?

Swami Sridharananda

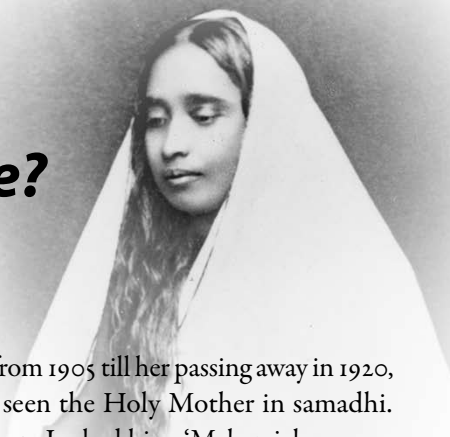
**S**RI SARADA DEVI is very often addressed as the Holy Mother of the Ramakrishna Order. Her life is so unusually commonplace that you have to find out the extraordinary simplicity, the extraordinary ‘commonplace-ness’ of her life, as it were, to highlight who she is and where she stands vis-à-vis her matchless master, Sri Ramakrishna. If you look into the life of Sri Ramakrishna, you will find it full of excellent manifestations of spiritual awareness unknown to human history, the excellences of spiritual experience and its manifestation. Swami Vivekananda’s was a short and dynamic life. He shook the world, as it were, and walked out on middle age—never saw his fortieth birthday. In them we have those who are supposed to explain to us the intricacies of spiritual life. In comparison, Holy Mother’s life is very natural and normal. She would probably have liked it that way. If we say she sits beside her matchless Master on a borrowed shrine, she would, I am sure, be enormously happy. But she sits there in her own right. Let me explain with a few examples.

## ‘Mahamaya, Parameshwari, Jagadamba’

In 1948, I had the great good fortune and privilege to be of some personal service to Swami Shantanandaji, a direct disciple of the Holy Mother, when he was sick and not in the best of health. I was asked to look after him, and while rendering whatever service I could, I was charmed by the simplicity of the swami. He was around sixty-five then, and was staying in Varanasi. While interacting with him I thought I was close enough to him to ask direct questions. We hear so much about Sri Ramakrishna’s spiritual experience; his frequent *bhava* and *samadhi*. I thought it would not be a bad question to ask Swami Shantanandaji, who had lived with Holy Mother on sev-

eral occasions from 1905 till her passing away in 1920, if he had ever seen the Holy Mother in *samadhi*. So, one afternoon, I asked him, ‘Maharaj, have you ever seen the Holy Mother go into *samadhi* like Sri Ramakrishna?’ He did not reply. I raised my voice and asked again. I could then see a reaction which was not very welcome. He was very irritated, and I could not understand why. I repeated the question a third time. And that swami, whom I had never seen lose his poise, was so annoyed. He said, ‘I never knew that you who claim yourself to be educated have such a low understanding, that you could be so petty-witted and mean-minded—*hina-buddhi*, *nicha-mana*. Who do you think my Mother is? Is she a *samanya sadhika*, an ordinary aspirant for spiritual wisdom? You don’t understand! She is the giver of *samadhi*! Be very clear. She doesn’t need to attain *samadhi*; she is the giver of *samadhi*. She is *sakshat* (veritable) Mahamaya, *sakshat* Parameshwari, *sakshat* Jagadamba!’ His face became flushed as he said this. After a while he added, ‘Listen to me carefully: all the spiritual excellence that you happen to appreciate in Sri Ramakrishna’s life was possible because my Divine Mother vouchsafed it to him; you will understand in due course of time.’ I could not understand what he meant. But the way of expression, the amount of conviction he carried, and the whole atmosphere did go into me. And I used to think over and over again as to what Shantanandaji meant by his statement.

In Vedanta, the following questions are often asked: What is Truth? What is Reality? How can one distinguish it from intellectual achievements, or ordinary human understanding? How can the experience of Truth be differentiated from aberrations of the human mind—from hallucination or self-deception? According to one definition,



## The Eternal Feminine

What is the source of the mesmerism of this name and personality? Even a slight acquaintance with her life will make us realize that this mesmerism does not proceed from any aspects of her personality which the modern world recognizes as significant in women. To all outward appearances the Holy Mother was just ordinary, or even less than ordinary. Rustic in simplicity, almost unlettered, and shy and modest, she was far removed from the educated, self-conscious, active type of modern women. And yet her life finds powerful respon-

sive echoes from hearts of all men and women, rustic and modern alike. It is evident that she has captured in her life and being the fundamental value which lies at the back of the womanliness of woman and which transcends all distinctions based on mere sex and the attractions thereof. This fact alone explains her universal appeal, representing, as she does, not a mere national or racial type, but the fulfilment of woman as woman, the realization in flesh and blood of the Eternal Feminine.

—Swami Ranganathananda

*'anatikramyam jnanam satyam*, Reality and Truth is such that you grow with it but you can never outgrow it.' Ultimately, you can merge yourself with it, but you can never outgrow it. For the last sixty years, I am growing with that statement that Holy Mother is not one of the excellent spiritual aspirants but is Mahamaya, Parameshwari, Jagadamba—the giver of all spiritual excellence. And that is how the Devi of the Hindu pantheon is worshipped. The spiritual brilliance of Sri Ramakrishna—the *sattvic* manifestations (*vikaras*)—belong to this perceptible world of ours, *indriya-rajya*, which is in the domain of maya; and this phenomenal world of maya is under the command of Mahamaya.

Some time later, I asked Shantanandaji if he had ever heard Holy Mother describe herself as Mahamaya or Jagadamba. In reply he narrated the following incident. A young boy in a remote village of Assam had read about Sri Ramakrishna. He was convinced that Sri Ramakrishna was Bhagavan, the Lord himself. He had read a little about Sri Sarada Devi and thought that if Sri Ramakrishna was Bhagavan, Sri Sarada Devi must be Bhagavati, the Divine Mother. So he imagined her seated on a throne, cared for by her companions, the *ashta-sakhis*—a regal lady of mighty excellence. With this picture in mind he walked from his village home in Assam to Jayrambati, dreaming of seeing the Holy Mother as *sakshat* Bhagavati. When he finally reached Holy Mother's house, tired and

weary, he saw a middle-aged woman, slightly rigid in her joints, a dusty linen wrapped round her body, sweeping the floor of the house. Taking her to be the maid of the house, he asked, 'I have come to see the Holy Mother, is this her house?' 'Yes, my dear, it is.' 'May I see her?' 'You are seeing her.' This reply so disillusioned and shocked him that he blurted out, 'Oh, this is *sakshat* maya! Is this Bhagavati?' Mother put the broom aside, cleaned her hands with her sari, and came over with a beatific smile, saying, 'Yes, my dear child, don't you know? I am Mahamaya! Come, come.' She then showered the boy with such motherly affection as no mother of this world can do; such was the totality with which she poured out her heart for the grieved child. She admitted in her own words that she was Mahamaya to remove the shock of disillusionment from the mind of her child who had come all the way expecting to see her so.

### ***'It is just as I had left it'***

The incident that took place when she went to Rameshwaram is well known. In early 1911, Holy Mother went on a pilgrimage to South India. Swami Ramakrishnananda organized the pilgrimage and travelled with her to Rameshwaram. The temple of Rameshwara Shiva was under the administrative control of the Raja of Ramnad, who was Swami Vivekananda's disciple. At the Raja's instruction, the crown covering the shiva-linga was removed

for the Holy Mother. She saw the shiva-linga and said, 'Oh, dear me, it is just as I had left it.' That spontaneous utterance gains special significance if one knows what it was all about. According to one version of the legend, when Sri Ramachandra destroyed Ravana and came back to the motherland, he was advised by his guru and acharyas—Vasishtha and other rishis—that, as Ravana was a devotee of Shiva and a brahmana, Sri Ramachandra should worship Shiva, perform penance, purify himself, and then enter the land. Hanuman went to Kailas to fetch Shiva. He was not found there. He was in Kashi. So he went to Kashi. Time was passing, and the rishis were very worried that if the auspicious time was allowed to slip by, the worship could not be performed. At that time, Mother Janaki, with her presence of mind, fashioned a shiva-linga from the sands of the seashore. And with the blessings of the rishis, Sri Ramachandra worshipped that shiva-linga. This linga is worshipped even today in Rameshwaram. Who but Mother Janaki herself could remember how she had left it? So the Holy Mother would occasionally get caught. She could not always conceal her true identity with her extraordinary ordinariness. Of course, there are hundreds of people who take her at her appearance and never bother to know who she really is.

### **'You are seeing him'**

Let me cite another incident which I heard from Swami Virajanandaji, the sixth president of the Ramakrishna Order, a sannyanin disciple of Swami Vivekananda and spiritual child of the Holy Mother. He was born in 1873 at Ahiritola in Kolkata. His paternal homestead was in the Simla quarter of Calcutta, which was frequented by Sri Ramakrishna; and the members of his family had interacted with him. An uncle of his was Swamiji's classmate. The incident in which the child Naren was warned by an old man against climbing a Champak tree for fear of ghosts, and Naren's disregarding the suggestion, took place in Virajanandaji's ancestral home. Unfortunately, though Sri Ramakrishna passed away only in 1886, Virajanandaji never had an oc-

casional to have his physical darshan, and that was a nagging agony within him. He used to denigrate himself for this. Once the Holy Mother was staying at Nilambar Mukherjee's garden house at Belur, and Kalikrishna (that was how Virajanandaji was commonly known in his younger days) was deputed to look after her, as he was quite young and also her initiated disciple. One day, he said to Mother, 'Look Mother, I am such an unfortunate creature. Having had all that opportunity, I never had Sri Ramakrishna's darshan in my life.' Mother was facing the wall. Slowly, she turned round, drew back her veil, looked at him, and said, 'What are you saying, my boy, you are unfortunate! My child, you *are* seeing him.' Kalikrishna was so taken aback by this expression of Mother's that he offered pranams and retreated from the room. But he was possessed by the thought, 'What did Mother mean by "you *are* seeing him"?' Did she mean that seeing her is the same as seeing Sri Ramakrishna? Later, he wrote to Mother from Calcutta asking her if he was right to interpret that statement of hers to mean that seeing her was the same as seeing the Master. Mother wrote back, 'My dear child, whatever you have thought is the reality.'

### ***Devi Saraswati***

Now, what did Sri Ramakrishna say about Sri Sarada Devi? 'She is Sarada, Saraswati; she has come to impart knowledge. She has descended by covering up her beauty this time, lest unregenerate people should come to grief by looking at her with impure eyes.' According to Indian thought, Saraswati is that aspect of the divine in the form of the Mother of the universe from whom all knowledge—whether spiritual or material—emanates. Sri Ramakrishna says that Mother Sarada Devi is Goddess Saraswati personified. She is born to help humans to rediscover themselves, to know their true nature. And she has no excellence of glamour. She has concealed her physical beauty so that people may not be carried away by it. She lets her children develop the insight needed to appreciate her true original nature.



During Sri Ramakrishna's lifetime, Sri Sarada Devi's social standing was largely that of the wife of a semi-mad brahmana priest. She knew that her husband was a unique spiritual personality and thought that if she were to be seen in front of people, his position might be compromised. So she herself decided to remain unseen. That is the self-abnegation of this extraordinary lady. But if you go through the biographies of Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother you will find numerous instances in which Sri Ramakrishna tries to give us an understanding of who she really is. Once, Sri Ramakrishna's nephew and personal attendant Hridayram behaved slightly disrespectfully towards his aunt, Sarada Devi. Sri Ramakrishna immediately warned him, 'My dear Hride, you may talk to this (pointing to his own body) slightly, but don't you do so to her. If the one that is in this (body) raises its hood, you may still be saved; but if the one that is in her raises its hood, even Brahma, Vishnu, and Maheshwara cannot save you.'

Sri Ramakrishna is widely acclaimed as an excellent manifestation of the concept of Incarnation, avatara. Let me cite an instructive incident in this regard. A devotee once said to Swami Saradananda, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna and the first general secretary of the Ramakrishna Order: 'Maharaj, by seeing his divine state of being, I can well have the faith that Sri Ramakrishna was God Himself. But how is it that I cannot comprehend that Mother (Sri Sarada Devi) is the Divine Mother herself?'

Swami Saradananda: 'If at all you have succeeded in believing that Sri Ramakrishna is God himself, whence then does this doubt arise at all?'

Devotee: 'Somehow this doubt does not leave me.'

Swami Saradananda: 'Then you have not been able to correctly comprehend Sri Ramakrishna as the Incarnation of God.'

Devotee (humbly): Excuse me Maharaj, I have that faith in Sri Ramakrishna.'

Swami Saradananda (firmly): 'Do you then mean to say that God married the daughter of a cow-dung-cake-gathering woman?'

So, Devi Bhagavati has concealed herself in such a manner that until and unless she shows herself, nobody is able to fathom her greatness and her excellence. That extraordinary ordinariness is something the world has never seen before. Here we have two extremes. Sri Ramakrishna surpassed all heights of spiritual attainment. He used to say, 'The state of this place (meaning his own experiences) has gone much beyond what is written in the Vedas and Vedanta.' And that is what draws the modern mind. He converted his personality into an experimental laboratory and proved that religions are nothing but different paths leading to that same goal. The concept of 'universal religion', which we find in the Vedanta literature, he proved to be true through his own experiences. If that is Sri Ramakrishna's uniqueness, Holy Mother's excellence lies in her extraordinary ordinariness. In her we find no trace of anything which can be claimed as 'superior'. Who could do that but Bhagavati herself?


### Divine Mother

From the pages of history we gather that avatars were accompanied by their divine consorts when the time and occasion demanded it. We also find that divine consorts often went to the extent of martyring themselves to enhance the standing of their masters, the Incarnations. Sri Ramachandra is *maryada purushottama*, the foremost among the honourable, because of the price mother Janaki paid to enhance his standing. Srimati Radhika deigned to be wiped out from human memory so that posterity could remember Sri Krishna as God himself, *bhagavan svayam*. Buddha left behind his wife and child and went in search of Truth to set an example that no price is too great to be paid for the sake of Truth. His wife Yashodhara spent her life in loneliness, though in the end she had his blessings and entered the monastic order along with her son. Acharya Shankara did not need a consort because he had come to establish the values of monasticism.

What is happening in this avatara, Sri Ramakrishna? He himself guided his mother, who was abso-

lutely exhausted looking out for a worthy match for her son, to go and choose the girl kept 'earmarked' and waiting for him. And when Sri Sarada Devi was eighteen, she asked her parents' permission to go and stand by her husband and serve him when people were declaring him to be sick and insane. When she did reach Dakshineswar, she found that Sri Ramakrishna's very first words were full of concern for her: 'Alas! You have come so late! Would that my Mathur were there now to serve you!' That concern for her welfare removed from her mind for all time the thought that her husband was insane. No insane person could express such sympathy and concern. Sri Ramakrishna then put to test his Vedantic realization that the Self is *chaitanya*, Spirit, beyond the body-mind complex, by having his wife sleep in the same room as he, because he had to look after her. And finally, he worshipped her as Tripurasundari Shodashi by putting her on the very pedestal on which Bhavatarini Kali is worshipped. He worshipped her by invoking in her that quality of divine motherhood that is represented by Tripurasundari Shodashi—the softest, sweetest, most gracious, ever-forgiving, and ever-forgiving aspect of motherhood. This aspect is the special

contribution of India's spiritual culture. The Vedic rishis, having come to the conclusion that there is something known as the Divine, looked skyward and asked, 'How do I conceive you? Do I conceive you as "father of the universe" or "mother of the universe", *uta va kumara, uta va kumari*?' And they said that if the Divine could be conceived of as father of the universe—the ruler, the giver of reward and punishment—why could we not think of her as mother of the universe—ever sweet, ever soft, ever gracious, ever forgiving, ever forbearing? The world was waiting to see—apart from mythology, apart from imagination—what this concept of the Divine Mother would be like if she were to be born in flesh and blood, in human form. The rehabilitation in human thinking of the idea of the 'mother of the universe' contained in a human form is the unique contribution of this divine couple.

So these ideas and incidents affirm that Sri Sarada Devi sits in her shrine in her own right. The more we culture and grow with these ideas, the more will they continue to open up their mysterious meanings. We will never be able to outgrow them, but we can merge into them. Let us pray that she, out of her kindness, shows us her benign face. 

**S**arada Devi belongs to a Universal Faith for which most of us are still groping. I should like to single out three features of her life on which alone the claim can be staked. It has been pointed out that her life was comparatively uneventful. Here we should remember that the supreme desire of the great mystic is just to 'appear ordinary'. As R H Thouless remarked with profound insight in his *An Introduction to the Psychology of Religion*, if we are to talk of 'sublimation' at all, we should have to say that: 'In mystical conversion it is not only that part of the libido specialised in the sex-instinct that is sublimated, but the whole of the libido employed in the activities and affections of this world-life.'

Nothing less will do. Sarada Devi's whole life refutes the allegation that ecstasy incapacitates us from performing our daily duties. The duties are performed by the great mystic, but in a radically altered frame of mind

which may escape detection by all save the most observant. ...

There is a second feature of the Holy Mother's life which lifts us above the barriers of caste and temple. Her love for others was no diffuse 'altruism' which tires of its zeal before it has run half its course; it always assumed the form of flaming loyalties to *persons*. Once, on seeing Swami Apurvananda pale and exhausted after a journey, she expressed her intense concern: 'Ah! How pale! What a sunken look! I am sure you had no food on the way. Make haste, my child! ...

I turn to a third aspect of Sarada Devi's religion which removes it far beyond the frontiers of creed and race. The secret of her burning love for others lay in her life of prayer. She was unflagging in her *japa* for all her disciples. She asked, 'Since I have taken their responsibilities, should I not see to their welfare?' —CTK Chari

# Mother: As I Saw Her at Dakshineswar

## Bhavatarini Devi

I WAS but a baby the day Thakur [Sri Ramakrishna] brought me over from Jhamapukur. I hadn't even learned to speak properly—I was dumb (*haba*); so I was called 'Habi'. A mother is the life of her baby; but I didn't notice any change in my mind at the change of mothers. Rather, what I didn't get from the mother at Jhamapukur, I received from the Mother [Sri Sarada Devi] here in abundant measure. Thakur lovingly named me after the Divine Mother in his temple: Bhavatarini. Mother would call me 'Bhavi', for short, and at times 'Bhavasundari'. That I had left behind a mother at Jhamapukur wouldn't enter my mind.



How much work I would do at Dakshineswar! No, Mother herself would ask me to do this or that, with my own hands: 'Go Bhavi, pick that flower; wash Thakur's dish in the Goose Pond and bring it here; rinse the cloth at the Bakultala Ghat and hang it on the fence to dry.' And I would do it. 'Go and see what Thakur is doing.' She would send me out like this so many times every day. And I would do [what she asked]. Mother would not let me sit idle; she would send me on little errands.

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Bhavatarini Devi (1877–1973), popularly known as 'Basumati Ma', was the wife of Upendranath Mukhopadhyaya (1886–1919), a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, who, though poverty stricken in his childhood, went on to become the founder and proprietor of the famous publishing agency Basumati Sahitya Mandir through Sri Ramakrishna's blessings. Bhavatarini Devi was looked upon by Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Sarada Devi as their own daughter; they also arranged her marriage. She was greatly respected for her devotion, austere habits, and love for pilgrimage. Bhavatarini Devi's reminiscences of Sri Sarada Devi have been translated from the Bengali text published in *Sri-Sri-Mayer Padapranante* (Kolkata: Udbodhan, 2003), 4.908–20.

That Mother kept me busy does not mean she made me toil; not at all. She would give me very light work, and she would say so many beautiful things. Mother would sit for worship by eight or nine in the morning. Before that, it was my job to pick flowers, prepare sandal paste, pick *durva* grass, and arrange these on the tray of offerings. Bel and tulsi leaves were also required. The bel leaves had to be all the same size; torn leaves would not do. Mother's orderliness was something to see. The whole thing looked like an embellished *panchapatra*, worship tray. The wonderful artistry that was involved in grinding sandalwood and arranging each flower is difficult to explain in words. It is hard to imagine how fast she worked. Slicing fruits and preparing betel rolls was an art with her. Whoever saw it would stand watching in wonder. I did not understand anything then. Mother taught me everything, holding me by the hand. A small room in the Nahabat comprised her entire household. But it was like a wonderful heaven, filled with perfect order. It beat the temple.

When Mother sat for worship, it was difficult to recognize her. She would not sit for very long, but the atmosphere would get transformed. At that time, being near her brought an eerie sensation. On finishing the worship she would call, 'Bhavi, where have you gone? Come, bow your head here; say: "Thakur, make me yours; hold me by the hand." Do you understand? [Showing the photograph of Thakur on the shrine] Take a good look at Thakur there.' I would find that the image was that of our Thakur. Initially, I would say, 'But He is our Thakur! When did he become a *devata*, deity?' Mother would laugh and say, 'Don't you bother about that now. When you grow up, you will understand. Now keep seeing as you do; only do as I say. Offer pran-

ams twice a day—morning and evening, all right? Early in the morning, get up and go to his room and offer pranams by touching his feet.’

I said, ‘But I do that, you have taught me so. Thakur takes me up on to his lap as soon as I go to touch his feet; he says, “O Bhavatarini, it is all right even if you don’t do all that. You are doing well, moving around nearby; keep doing so and keep her [that is, Mother] whom you are staying with in sight. Don’t you know, you don’t need anything else.”’ Mother was very pleased; putting her face to my head, she kissed me and gave me a handful of prasad—sweets and fruits.



Thakur alone knows how much he used to sleep at night. He could not even stand others’ sleeping a little at night. He would walk over to the Nahabat, his slippers slapping along, and standing beside the bamboo blinds, would say, ‘O Lakshmi, O Bhavatarini, why don’t you get up, how long will you sleep?’ He would call our names, but the words were for Mother. Mother would already be sitting; she would clear her throat to announce, ‘I am up, you need not worry.’

Thakur would proceed towards the Panchavati. Mother would say, ‘You need not get up now. Stay in bed.’ I would turn over and go to sleep. On the days that I did not fall asleep, I would watch Mother going alone in that dark night to the Bakultala Ghat; she would return a little later, put her clothes out to dry, ‘wake up’ Thakur [that is, the photograph which she worshipped], wipe his face, and put him on his seat. Sitting in silence near the image, she would get transformed. It would appear that someone else was sitting there. If some other woman devotee or Lakshmi Didi were there, then Mother would get up shortly, wake me up, and say, ‘Now get up, go to the Goose Pond, and wash your face and hands.’ Meanwhile she would go to Thakur’s room and tidy up his bed. On some days she would take me along and make me work with my own hands. On most days Thakur would be in the Bhavatarini temple at that time.

Mother would do all her work very fast, but to

perfection. She did not like sloppy work. I was very disorderly at first. She would teach me, holding my hand; standing near, she would tell me what to do. She would herself say, ‘See Bhavi, what other worship would you do—every work is worship, keep this in mind from now on. For women, all these works are in themselves worship. Do you understand?’

Mother used to instruct us to take a little Ganga-water in our hands before beginning any work. She would herself do so, and would also sprinkle some on our heads. She used to call the water of the Ganga *brahma-vari*, Brahman-water. I got that by heart. From that day till now, if I think of doing anything, I want *brahma-vari*. Mother was not too fastidious about following customs. She would not even ask us to change clothes often. We started wearing saris at a very young age. Mother would herself comb my hair. She would send me to do something or other in Thakur’s room both morning and evening.



Pitambar Bhandari’s daughter and two or three other playmates of my age would come every day from the village of Dakshineswar. They too were greatly loved by Mother and Thakur. How many games we would play—running, hide-and-seek on the branches of trees, swimming in the Goose Pond, and so many others! But, in between all that, I would run back and see Mother. One day we had great fun. A group of relatives came from the Jhamapukur house. They had come from Jayrambati to bathe in the Ganga. They also found time to come and see their ‘Saru’ [Mother Sarada Devi] and the ‘mad son-in-law’. They came to see how Saru was managing her household. There were about six of them. On arrival, they met Thakur in his room and then came to the Nahabat. There was much talk of the old village days. I stood nearby, drinking everything in. In the course of conversation, one of the visitors—she was around the same age as Mother—said: ‘Hello there, Ganda-phul (marigold-flower), do you remember me, or, having got Bholanath [Shiva, an utterly forgetful person] for a husband, have you

conveniently forgotten Jaba (hibiscus)?' So saying, she tapped Mother on her chin and burst out laughing. Immediately, someone next to her asked, 'What was that? Tell us too, let us also hear.' Mother was bashful, she only smiled. The other woman said, 'One day, in the rainy season, we slipped and fell into the Banerjee's Pond while bathing, but neither of us let go of the other. We clung to each other. An elderly woman who was near at hand pulled us out. Even then we were hugging each other. Seeing this she said, "Are you friends? I give you the names Ganda and Jaba. Understand?" That was great fun. Since then Saru's name is Ganda, and mine, Jaba.'

I had a few daily tasks for the *sandhya* or evening devotions; Thakur himself took me along and taught me these things. A lamp had to be lighted at the shrine of Gazi Pir; then Mother's worship place in the Nahabat had to be incensed—Mother would sit [for her devotions] without fail. Those who would be present at the Nahabat in the evening would sit round Mother. I would sit very close to her. I would gaze at her more than at Thakur [that is, his photograph]. Her appearance would be wonderful then. On the other side, *arati* would be going on in the different temples, in Thakur's room there would be singing of the names of Hari, and the surface of the Ganga would be lit up with the reflection of the lights all around—that was a divine atmosphere. Humans would not remain humans then; everything [worldly] would seem to be forgotten. This was an inseparable part of our daily lives, it cannot be forgotten. Many thoughts of that young mind have been drowned in the depths of oblivion, but the memories of the poetic ambience of those evenings have not been erased even today.

Thakur used to say, 'Drop everything else and take God's name at dawn and dusk.' He would himself clap his hands and make us repeat God's name. He would say, 'Chant aloud, all the evil things inside will go out, and body and mind will become pure.' Today he is no more by my side as in those days, but even now, as soon as it is dusk, someone lends a voice in chanting the names of Rama and Hari—I can hear it clearly. It is his voice, setting the

tune like a flute.

I would go to Thakur's room after the evening services were over. Thakur would usually be sitting alone, lost in thought; he would not speak much. He would only say, 'There is prasad kept on the stool there, take it to the Nahabat. And your share is also there, come and eat.' I would hand the plate of prasad to Mother in the Nahabat, have my share, lie down on Thakur's small cot, and go to sleep. Later in the night, Mother would take me to the Nahabat. I would wake up then. Mother and I and anyone else who happened to be there would have our supper; then I would lie down by Mother's side and insist on hearing stories. Mother would ask, 'Do you remember what he (that is, Thakur) said today? Let me hear!' She would listen, and then tell many things herself.

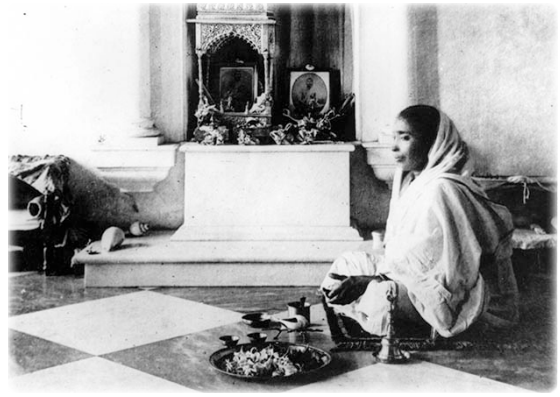
One day, in the course of our talk, I said, 'Your name is Ganda, and your friend's name Jaba, isn't that so? Those who came from Jayrambati the other day said so. I too shall call you "Ganda-phul Didi", all right?' Mother said, 'Why dear, don't you like calling me "Mother"?' 'It's not that, still I shall address you as "Ganda-phul Didi".' Mother did not say 'no'. It appeared she had no objection. After that, I would address Mother as 'Ganda-phul Didi'. She too would respond.

Mother did not usually spend time chatting. One thing I noticed in particular: whatever work she might be doing, at whatever time, her lips would be moving. One day we had great fun. Mother said to me, 'See Bhavi, I'm just going to Thakur's room with his drinking water.' I said, 'Give it to me, I'll take it there.' Mother did not give it. She said, 'You rather sit near the fire and see that the dal doesn't boil over; if it starts doing so, pour a little water. Understand?' Mother went away, saying, 'There is no one in the room now, let me quickly go and give this.' Mother went, and the water [dal] was boiling. I was all attention, ready to pour water as soon as it tried to boil over. I was also muttering like Mother—after all, I had seen her do so while cooking! [Actually] only my lips were moving. The pot started to boil over, and I had taken the water-

jar in my left hand to pour water when Mother arrived. 'Move, Bhavi,' she said, 'What are you muttering?' 'Nothing—I have seen you do so while cooking, so [I was doing the same].' Mother smiled and said, 'O mad girl, you are so small, yet you have noticed what I do? I don't mutter, I take Thakur's [God's] name. That is called japa. One must take God's name in the midst of work, then the work turns out well. Now go and mop Thakur's room. First sweep it with a broom.' I rushed to Thakur's room. But sweeping had to wait. Naren-da [the future Swami Vivekananda] had come, with two others. On seeing me Naren-da said, 'Look here, Shankchunni (ghoul)! Pour me some water from that pot, I am thirsty.' I refused to comply. I said, 'I can't. Why do you call me by that ugly name?' Naren-da laughed, held my hand, and pulling me near, said, 'O Shankchunni, if you serve water and tobacco with those hands of yours, you will become as handsome as I am. Only then can you get a handsome husband! Now run and get me a glass of water, and prepare me a chillum.' Thakur was not in the room—I could not sweep it. I served the water. I did not quite know how to prepare a chillum. All the same, I took a chillum from the hookah lying in the veranda and went to the Nahabat. On seeing me, Mother asked, 'Have you finished the sweeping and mopping?' 'No, Naren-da has come, Thakur is not there; he asked me to prepare a chillum. Do I know how to prepare a smoke?' 'Here, you need not know that. Give me the chillum.' Mother picked up a piece of charcoal from the fire with a pair of tongs, and placing the chillum in a coconut shell, said to me, 'Take it.' Seeing the chillum so nicely arranged, Naren-da said, 'What did you do! Who arranged it like this?' I said, 'Why? Mother.' Immediately, Naren-da put his hand on his head, and said, 'O Shankchunni, what have you done? What calamity! How can I smoke from this chillum?' Dada touched the chillum to his head, got up, and himself prepared a chillum to smoke.

♦ ♦ ♦

There would not be much talk with Mother during the day. She would send me to Pitambar Bhand-



Sri Sarada Devi at worship

ri's daughter. Sitting there on a mat in a small room near the cashier's office, the two of us, along with a few other boys and girls, would read, practise writing the alphabet, and learn arithmetic tables. When we returned, Mother, though busy, would ask, 'What have you read today? Let me hear.' She would say, 'Study as long as you can; you are born a girl, you never know when you will get married! Did the Creator will reading and writing for us? People have learnt this one rubbish—marriage! As if women have nothing else to do in their lives except marry!' Drawing in a deep breath she said, 'With what effort did Thakur arrange for me to study a little. Even books were procured, but it didn't happen. Without education, life is as good as death. The whole of womankind is dead.'

Not a single day would pass that Mother did not enquire about my studies. Hers was a wonderful method. I would often feel sleepy after the *arati*, evening worship. And Mother would say that sleeping at dusk makes one short-lived. Mother would herself sit before Thakur's image. She would be able to devote only a little time for japa and meditation. After that, if there was no one else there and if I had not gone to Thakur's room, she would say, 'Bhavi, sit.' She would sing softly, and ask me to sing with her. At first I did not realize it, but later I found what a sweet voice Mother had! She would say, 'Sing loudly, dear, not softly. Thakur would tell me, "Sing for God in a loud voice. You will find what a sweet voice God gives you."' I would imitate Mother's voice. Next, she would say, 'Now tell



me, what have you read today? Let me learn a little from what you have read. Now teach me a little.' I was rather audacious. Whether I studied [properly] or not, I was very fond of teaching. So I would tell her whatever I had studied. Mother would correct any mistakes. The day this [study] was not possible in the evening, I would have to tell her while lying beside her at night. She would narrate many stories then: from the Ramayana and Mahabharata, stories about Krishna, Dhruva, and Prahlada, and the story of 'Brother Madhusudana'—about that small pot of curd that could never be emptied, the more you poured the more it brought forth.



Mother's method of teaching was unique. One never realized that she was teaching. Without advice, without tall talk, she would put very important matters into people's minds—whatever their age, social standing, or temperament; child, elderly person, youth, dacoit, thief, cheat, whoever—in a simple and effortless manner. Mother would say, 'Correct faults, but do not hold the person guilty. Our own mind first develops the blemish that we try to see in others.'

An incident comes to mind. I had just crossed seven and entered my eighth year. A kitten was staying near Mother, always keeping near her feet; but it would not put its mouth to anything in her room. It had also become a member of Mother's family. One day, I don't remember why, it put its mouth to my food. I immediately became angry. I could not control myself and gave it a couple of blows with the handle of a hand-fan. Crying out 'meow, meow', the kitten hid behind Mother's feet and started rubbing its face. Mother suddenly let out an 'Ah!' and became very different. She exclaimed, 'What did you do! What did you do!' I was dumbstruck. I ran over and hugged her, saying, 'What happened, Mother?' Mother, having regained her poise by then, said, 'O Bhavi, why did you hit it so?' I could only keep looking at her compassionate face. She did not say a harsh word; taking the kitten in her lap, she caressed it. I had had my punishment. Never again have I raised a hand against a dog or cat.

Thakur's and Mother's words are like nectar. One can never finish telling them. From the least to the biggest of matters, nothing was beyond Mother's sight. She would herself take me to Thakur's bedroom, both morning and evening. She would teach me how to sweep and how to replace the broom after sweeping. Every thing must be kept in its proper place, so that one can find it even in the dark. How much water there ought to be in the pot, how the cover was to be placed—perfectly centred—how the rug and the mat were to be spread: everything was done methodically, without the least carelessness. Washing and arranging the puja vessels, preparing betel rolls, cleaning Thakur's slippers—nothing would be left out. She would explain things by doing them herself. She would say, 'Bhavi, this is the first worship for girls. Do you understand?' Further, 'Women must not make noise while walking, nor laugh loudly, nor lift their clothes above the knees. They must not speak loudly, but neither should they be too timid or mumbling. One must take the name of Durga before going anywhere, and should not call out for someone from behind. While getting up on to a vehicle or into a boat, one must enter first and get out last. One must speak in a friendly and cheerful manner with all, and not let one's words hurt anyone's feelings.'

Mother's words, spoken in the midst of her daily chores, were like sweets! Could I possibly remember everything she said? I may not, but having lived under her affectionate care, I had her words imprinted on my body. I have learnt to not do any work without offering pranams to Thakur.

Now and then, Thakur would himself bring jute strings and bamboo-slips. Mother would prepare beautiful mats and many other useful articles out of them. She would have me pick flowers and then prepare garlands for Mother Bhavatarini. I would go and hand them over in the temple or to Thakur in the afternoon. She taught me everything. She also taught me a bit of cooking, but would not usually allow me near the fire. She would generally give me outdoor work. Mother's entire day was sweet and calm, like a prayer. Just as all of God's work

is being accomplished silently, so was Mother's daily routine like music tuned to nature's rhythm—threaded to a poetic melody. If one ignores this aspect of Mother, one cannot understand, let alone recognize her. Is she divine or human? No, neither of the two, she is just Mother. This is God's new creation this time, a new wave, a new song—everything filled with newness. The world is resounding now with the strains of a new motherhood. The Mother of the universe had told Thakur at the end of his sadhana, 'You remain in *bhavamukha* [the junction of the Absolute and the relative].' Thakur told Mother at the end of all [her] sadhana, 'You remain as Jagaddhatri, the support of the world, for nurturing the spirit of motherhood.'

♦ ♦ ♦

I see Mother even now. Let me explain. I went to Puri in 1362 BE [1955–6 CE]. From there I came to Mother's home at Jayrambati. The Mahanta of the ashrama was very pleased. The ashrama arranged for my stay and food. After bath, I went to the Simhavahini temple. 'What deity is Simhavahini?' I asked several people, but no one could tell me. Ganapati was performing the worship. He got up anxiously on seeing me, 'Come, Aunt, come in. Oh, what good fortune! I am seeing Auntie after such a long time.' Ganapati is Mother's nephew, and mine as well. Shyamasundari and Elokeshi were sisters. Mother [Sarada Devi] is Shyamasundari's daughter, and I, Elokeshi's. Because of this relationship they call me '*pishi-ma*, aunt'.

I asked Ganapati, 'Now Ganapati, what deity is Simhavahini?' Ganapati said, 'She is a very *jagrata* (awakened) deity, Auntie. Numerous people come here from far-off places. Someone is losing his fingers, another has abdominal colic; still another vows an offering to have his son cured. Someone else, suffering from problems in the family, undertakes a vow of fasting, gets a flower [from the Devi], and returns home having had his or her desire fulfilled.'

'I understand all that. But tell me what deity Simhavahini is!'

Ganapati started scratching his head. And why

Ganapati, I asked Mother's sisters-in-law, they too said the same thing. I enquired of the Mahanta and got hazy answers there too. What deity is Mother Simhavahini? That was the one question rising in my mind. The worship ended. I was sitting alone before Mother Simhavahini, talking to her: 'Mother Simhavahini, who are you, Mother? O Mother, you are Simhavahini, who are you Mother? Mother Simhavahini, do tell me, Mother!' Suddenly, Mother's temple was filled with a sweet fragrance. With a flash, the entire room was filled with light. I could no longer see Mother's small sacred pitcher. Instead, I saw a live lion! Both its ears were moving; so was the tail. And seated atop the lion was Jagaddhatri! She had a brilliant red hue. 'O my dear, are you Simhavahini? Mother Simhavahini, you are Jagaddhatri! O Mother Jagaddhatri, you are Simhavahini!' What is this! In the twinkling of an eye, Jagaddhatri disappeared. Seated there was Mother Durga, ten-armed, on the lion's back. 'O Mother Simhavahini, you are Jagaddhatri, and again you are Durga! How many are the forms you have, Mother!' Hardly a minute or two had passed when there was neither Durga nor Jagaddhatri. Sitting on the seat was my Mother Sarada in all her radiance; her hair spread out over her breast [as seen in her photograph].

'Mother, Mother dear! You are Sarada, you are Simhavahini, you are Jagaddhatri, and again you are Durga! O my Saru-didi, O my Ganda-phul Didi, you are Mother Sarada! Again you are Jagaddhatri! And you are also Durga! Oh! What joy!' Wrapping my cloth round my neck [a sign of reverence], I offered pranams to Mother. On lifting my head I found that Mother was there no more. Neither was Jagaddhatri on the lion; nor my ten-armed Durga. The sacred pitcher was there as before on the altar. My heart was full to the brim. Mother appeared to me and explained who Simhavahini is. I have to tell this to everyone. I shall tell this to those who undertake the vow of fasting at Mother's temple without knowing [who she is]; and to those who have had their wishes fulfilled by receiving the flowers and leaves offered to her.





# Buddha in Swami Vivekananda's Eyes

Swami Sandarshananda

THE traditional accounts of Buddha's life are replete with often improbable myths and miraculous tales. These are contrary to what Buddha himself practised and preached. He was a pragmatist, having no weakness for esoteric imagery. His keen practical sense compelled him to search for the root of human problems; finding life blighted by miseries, he dealt squarely with the question of human suffering and offered a spiritual solution that blazed a fresh trail to salvation. He discovered that there are no external means by which we can go beyond our suffering and attain peace permanently. Hence he asked us to be 'a refuge' to ourselves, instead of looking to any outside source for aid. Before giving up his body he addressed his disciples, saying: 'And now, brethren, I take my leave of you: all the constituents of being are transitory: work out your salvation with diligence.'<sup>1</sup>

Swami Vivekananda believed that Buddha's followers failed to understand him properly.<sup>2</sup> In presenting his teachings according to their own comprehension, they obscured the real Buddha. Swamiji says: 'He was one of those monks who wanted to bring out the truths, hidden in those books [the Vedas] and in the forest monasteries. I do not believe that the world is ready for them even now; it still wants those lower religions, which teach of a personal God. Because of this, the original Buddhism could not hold the popular mind, until it took up the modifications, which were reflected back from Thibet and the Tartars' (2.509).

A L Basham concludes that the parts of the Buddhist scriptures 'which purport to give his teachings verbatim are by no means reliable.'<sup>3</sup> Having been recited from memory, they are open to doubt, for they 'grew by a long process of development and

accretion' lasting centuries (263). Soon after Buddha's demise, the first council was held at Rajagriha, in which the *Vinaya Pitaka* or rules of the Order and the *Sutta Pitaka* or sermons on the doctrine were recited by Upali and Ananda, both Buddha's direct disciples, respectively. But this council could not remove misgivings from the minds of Buddha's followers as to what were his exact teachings. A hundred years later another council was called at Vaishali, and the followers split into two groups, the orthodox and the liberals, disagreeing over minor points of monastic discipline. 'Numerous such differences appeared at the third great council, held at Pāṭaliputra under the patronage of Aśoka' (263), where the *Abhidhamma Pitaka*, dealing with metaphysics, was added to the Pali scriptures. But most of its matter is suspect, since Buddha's direct disciples played no part in its composition. When Swamiji says he does 'not believe many of his doctrines', he surely bears this in his mind.<sup>4</sup> He therefore makes his own analysis of Buddha's life and message, developing an intelligible portrait of the Master by applying his intellectual discretion and spiritual acumen.

Swamiji regarded Buddha as a Hindu. He elaborates: 'You must not imagine that there was ever a religion in India called Buddhism ... Nothing of the sort! The idea was always within Hinduism. Only the influence of Buddha was paramount at one time, and made the nation monastic.'<sup>5</sup> This made it easy for the common people to accept him as their spiritual pathfinder in spite of his unorthodox teachings, and worship him as God. To Swamiji, Buddha professed nothing essentially new—he only reformed the old religion that required cleansing. In the process he reinstated 'democracy' in the realm of religion, which had been

lost under priestly tyranny. He exhorted his followers to rectify their conduct and assiduously follow the eight-fold discipline known as the Middle Path, leading to the annihilation of suffering. Swamiji likens Buddha's contribution to that of George Washington: 'Buddha was the Washington of the religious world; he conquered a throne only to give it to the world, as Washington did to the American people. He sought nothing for himself.'<sup>6</sup>

At the time of Buddha's advent, Hinduism had been hijacked by the priest class; ceremonials gained popularity at the expense of true spirituality, and ostentation and charlatanism came into vogue. Buddha halted Hinduism's decline, restored its pristine purity, and opened its gates to all and sundry once again. He released religion from the clutches of caste, declaring caste only a social institution having no bearing whatsoever on religion. Swamiji says: 'He had the large-heartedness to bring out the truths from the hidden Vedas and throw them broadcast all over the world' (1.22). Swamiji's regard for Buddha knew no bounds; Buddha's unprecedented 'humanising power' inspired him strongly. As a mark of this extraordinary respect, he delivered an address on 'Buddhism, the Fulfilment of Hinduism' at the Chicago parliament of religions in 1893, although he was there to represent Hinduism. The title chosen is equally intriguing since, notwithstanding his sincere allegiance to Hinduism, Swamiji did not shrink from presenting Buddhism as Hinduism's fulfilment.

Swamiji always maintained that Buddhism's origin lay in Hinduism, and considered it a 'rebel child' of the latter, fearlessly sweeping away casteism and religious decadence. 'Hinduism cannot live without Buddhism, nor Buddhism without Hinduism,' was his conviction (1.23). Ironically, later Buddhists were unable to discern this implicit relationship. They demonstrated a blatant hostility towards the Vedas and 'took away from the nation that eternal God to which every one, man or woman, clings so fondly. And the result was that Buddhism had to die a natural death in India' (1.22). They could

not 'realise the import of his teachings' and, thereby, 'did not understand the fulfilment of the truths of the Hindu religion' (1.21) revealed by him. But this rift had tragic consequences. Swamiji holds that 'this separation between the Buddhists and the Brahmins is the cause of the downfall of India.' Why? Because 'the Buddhists cannot stand without the brain and philosophy of the Brahmins, nor the Brahmin without the heart of the Buddhist. ... That is why India has been the slave of conquerors for the last thousand years' (1.23).

### ***The Only Sane Man Ever Born***

Swami Vivekananda acknowledged the limitations of biographical documents drawn from ancient texts and offered a metaphysical interpretation of Buddha's advent, more or less in line with the idea of descent of God as Incarnation propounded in the Bhagavadgita—that an Incarnation appears to halt the decline of dharma. This was natural for him, since he attached more importance to principles than to persons who embodied them. He never bothered about the details of Buddha's birth, save discussing whether it was of any hereditary significance. Was there any link between the son's 'gigantic will' and 'accumulation of power' and the father's personal traits? He found none: 'Millions and millions of petty kings like Buddha's father had been in the world. If it was only a case of hereditary transmission, how do you account for this petty prince, who was not, perhaps, obeyed by his



own servants, producing this son, whom half a world worships?’ (1.30). The explanation for Buddha’s spiritual power lies, for him, in the theory of karma. Since Buddha speaks of five hundred previous births, that power must have gathered strength over the course of those lives. Buddha’s commitment to love, truth, and unselfishness from birth to birth fetched him Buddhahood in his birth as Siddhartha, the son of Suddhodana of Kapilavastu. There was an inextinguishable urge within him that ultimately rewarded him with such a lofty attainment. Swamiji therefore concludes: ‘It must have been there through ages and ages, continually growing bigger and bigger, until it burst on society in a Buddha ... even rolling down to the present day’ (1.30–31). According to Swamiji, he built his own destiny, creating a *samskara* to love and serve unconditionally.

Admiring Buddha the man, Swami Vivekananda said: ‘All his life he was a most stern man: he never yielded to weakness’ (3.527). Swamiji found in him a peerless combination of heart and intellect, embodying the consummation of human development. Buddha had not a curse on his lips for anyone, even the worst of criminals. His renunciation was complete. He incessantly worked for the good of the world for more than four decades after his realization, but never harboured an iota of personal motive. In spite of his greatness, he was so humble and humane. Swamiji was enormously impressed by his humility. He never tired of describing Buddha’s death scene, where Buddha obliges the lowly and poor Chanda, accepting from him the meal which would kill him. Even in his last sermon then, he reminds his disciples—as Swami Vivekananda tells it—‘Each one of you is just what I am. I am nothing but one of you. ... Do you struggle and make yourselves what I am’ (3.528).

Buddha has all the signs of a karma yogi ‘who understands that the highest ideal is non-resistance, and who also knows that this non-resistance is the highest manifestation of power in actual possession, and also what is called the resisting of evil is but a step on the way towards the manifesta-

tion of this highest power, namely, non-resistance’ (1.39). He didn’t want to confuse people with ‘various theories about God’. He taught only to be good and do good, and he himself ‘soared so high above all’ by his conduct. He is the unique man who preached ‘the highest philosophy, yet had the deepest sympathy for the lowest of animals, and never put forth any claims for himself’. Paying him rich tribute, Swamiji says: ‘He is the ideal Karma-Yogi, acting entirely without motive, and the history of humanity shows him to have been the greatest man ever born; beyond compare the greatest combination of heart and brain that ever existed, the greatest soul-power that has ever been manifested. He is the first great reformer the world has seen’ (1.117).

There are, however, greater spiritual personalities, according to Swamiji, about whom the world has no knowledge. Compared to them, Buddha is a ‘second-rate hero’, differing in nature from them. ‘Hundreds of these unknown heroes have lived in every country working silently. Silently they live and silently they pass away; and in time their thoughts find expression in Buddhas or Christs, and it is these latter that become known to us’ (1.105). They are unknown, says Swamiji, because ‘they are the pure *Sāttvikas*, having no trace of *rajas* in them. No physical activity is therefore possible for them; they only leave their ideas for others to work out and do good to the world. Their nature shrinks at the very idea of establishing any ‘school or system in their name’. They ‘can never make any stir but melt down in love’. It is the teachers like Buddha—who have a predominance of *sattva* mixed with a little *rajas*—who are of ‘combative natures’. They move from place to place and carry on the task of reformation, the seeds of which come from those greatest ones. Swamiji says: ‘In the life of Gautama Buddha we notice him constantly saying that he is the twenty-fifth Buddha. The twenty-four before him are unknown to history, although the Buddha known to history must have built upon foundations laid by them’ (1.105–6).

In Buddhism, says Dr S Radhakrishnan, is found

'the concrete embodiment of thought in the life of a man. This unity of thought and life worked wonderfully on the world of the time.'<sup>7</sup> He is amazed that 'six centuries before Christ there lived in India a prince second to none before him or after in spiritual detachment, lofty idealism, nobility of life and love for humanity' (ibid.). His compassion overflowed, flooding parched souls everywhere—the indigent, the well-to-do, the infidel, the cruel, and the fallen. He could stop a war simply 'by walking between the assembled armies and convincing them of the uselessness of bloodshed'.<sup>8</sup> He converted the notorious bandit Angulimala from evil ways. He accepted the invitation of a courtesan despite the strong reservations of his disciples and made her to renounce the life of disrepute in order to lead the life of a devout Buddhist. Above all, Ajatashatru—the heinous ruler of Magadha, who killed his father Bimbisara and by whose connivance Devadatta, jealous cousin of Buddha, planned to murder Buddha—became devoted by his benign influence. From him Ajatashatru first 'sought a salve for his conscience, tormented by his sense of [such] grievous sin as a parricide'.<sup>9</sup> Presumably, 'it was a turning point of his religious life' (ibid.). That is why Swamiji places Buddha at the apex of human achievements and inspires us to evolve ourselves likewise. The historian A L Basham reflects Swamiji's thought when he says, 'Even if judged only by his posthumous effect on the world at large he was certainly the greatest man to have been born in India.'<sup>10</sup>

Swamiji himself was deeply touched by Buddha's spirit and personality; this is reflected in everything he did. He himself resembles Buddha; richly endowed as he is with sublime power, courage, pragmatism, wisdom, freedom, love, and compassion. His letters too are suffused with these values, and reflect Buddha's influence on his character. We cite some excerpts below from Swamiji's letter to Alasinga Perumal and all his Madras disciples, written from New York on 19 November 1894. Every word echoes Buddha's voice, revealing Buddha's influence over him:

Push on with the organization. At any cost, we must succeed, we must. No nay in this case. Nothing else is necessary but these—*Love, Sincerity, and Patience*. What is life but growth, i.e. expansion, i.e. *love*? Therefore all love is life, it is the only law of life, all selfishness is *death*, and this is true here or hereafter. Even if there is no hereafter, it is life to do good, it is death not to do good to others. Ninety per cent of human brutes you see are dead, are *ghosts*—for none lives, my boys, but he who loves. Feel, my children, feel; feel for the poor, the ignorant, the downtrodden, feel till the heart stops and the brain reels and you think you will go mad—then pour the soul out at the feet of the Lord and then will come power, help and indomitable energy. Struggle, struggle was my motto for the last ten years. Struggle, still say I. When it was all dark I used to say, struggle, when light is breaking in, I still say, struggle. Be not afraid, my children. Look not up in that attitude of fear towards that infinite starry vault as if it would crush you. Wait! In a few hours more the whole of it will be under your feet. Wait, money does not pay, nor name; fame does not pay, nor learning. It is love that pays; it character that cleaves its way though adamantine walls of difficulties. ...

There cannot be any growth without liberty. Our ancestors freed religious thought, and we have wonderful religion. But they put a heavy chain on the feet of society. ...

Liberty is the first condition of growth. Just as man must have liberty to think and speak, so he must have liberty in food, dress, and marriage and in every other thing, so long as he does not injure others. ...

I do not believe in a God who cannot give me bread here, giving me eternal bliss in heaven! Pooh! India is to be raised, the poor are to be fed, education is to be spread, and the evil of priestcraft is to be removed. ...

Now, this is to be brought about slowly and by only insisting on our religion and giving liberty to society. Root up priest craft from the old religion, and you get the best religion in the world. ...

Work, work, for to work only for the good of others is life.<sup>11</sup>

The letter is replete with instructions of the kind received from a world teacher like Buddha. It

equips us with a practical sense for serving others with a spiritual attitude, which was also, in essence, Buddha's precept. Besides, Alasinga was Swamiji's trusted follower, in whom Swamiji would often informally confide, providing a glimpse of his heart that held Buddha so dear. The letter speaks amply about the man Vivekananda, confirming that he too, like Buddha, had a message to deliver—as he himself declared.

The originality of Buddha's approach won Swamiji's heart. He always believed that Buddha had a message which he gave in his own way in accordance with the demands of the time. Similarly, he knew that he too had a message to deliver, a mandate laid on him by his master, Sri Ramakrishna. He unequivocally proclaimed: 'I have a message, and I will give it after my own fashion. I will neither Hinduise my message, nor Christianise it, nor make it any "ise" in the world. I will only my-ise it and that is all.'<sup>12</sup> Both Buddha and Swamiji, in fact, spread the message of the Upanishads in the manner suited to their respective ages. But in Swamiji's opinion, Buddha's 'fatal mistake' was in 'thinking that the whole world could be lifted to the height of the Upanishads'.<sup>13</sup> Notwithstanding his highest regard for Buddha, Swamiji did not hesitate to point out Buddha's limitations wherever necessary. Against Buddha's teaching 'that the many was real and the ego unreal', he professed that 'the Many and the One are the same Reality, perceived by the same mind at different times and in different attitudes' (1.29). Yet he never shifted from his position that Buddha was 'the only man in the world who was ever quite sane, the only sane man ever born!' (1.177).

### He Saw Buddha in Ramakrishna

Sister Nivedita wrote a beautiful chapter on 'The Swami Vivekananda and His Attitude to Buddha' in her monumental biographical work, *The Master as I Saw Him*. She makes there a unique observation: 'But it was not only the historic authenticity of the personality of Buddha that held him [Swamiji] spell-bound. Another factor, at least as powerful, was the spectacle of the constant tallying

of his own Master's life, lived before his eyes, with this world-attested story of twenty-five centuries before. In Buddha, he saw Ramakrishna Paramahansa: in Ramakrishna, he saw Buddha' (1.175). It was but natural for Vivekananda to look for someone who could testify to the spiritual experience of Buddha. He had studied widely before coming to Sri Ramakrishna, and had investigated Buddha's life and teachings. The *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* records his enthusiastic discussion about Buddha with his Master. He maintained his habit of study, and later discussed some contentious issues of Buddhism through correspondence with the veteran scholar Pramadadas Mitra of Banaras, after Sri Ramakrishna's demise. During his sojourns through India as itinerant monk he had conversations with other erudite scholars such as Bal Gangadhar Tilak; we can presume that some of their discussions must have been on Buddha. He read, with his brother disciples, the *Lalita Vistara* and the Mahayana scripture *Prajna Paramita*. He visited Bodh Gaya on several occasions, the last being on the morning of his thirty-ninth birthday, a few months before his death.

(To be concluded)

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# The Song of the Sannyasin: A Meditation

Swami Yogeshananda

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA left us a number of remarkable poems, among which ‘The Song of the Sannyasin’ has been judged by those who know English poetry to be his best. That is from the standpoint of poetic composition. The spiritual significance of the poem is equally superlative. In 1961, at Vivekananda Cottage, Thousand Island Park, I delighted in seeing the original manuscript and hearing the story of its unusual discovery. In the monastery at Ganges, Michigan, during the seventies and eighties, we recited it each morning after *mangalarati*. I have kept up the practice ever since, so have had ample opportunity to dwell upon the implications of Swamiji’s inspiration; some of those occurring to me are presented here.

Wake up the note! the song that had its birth  
Far off, where wordly taint could never reach,  
In mountain caves and glades of forest deep,  
Whose calm no sigh for lust or wealth or fame  
Could ever dare to break; where rolled the stream  
Of knowledge, truth, and bliss that follows both.  
Sing high that note, Sannyasin bold! Say—  
‘Om Tat Sat, Om!’

What *song*? The song of the free, of every sannyasin. *Far off*? Yes, born in the hills of the Himalayas, in their forests and caves, and on their peaks. *Could never reach*—why? In those mountain fastnesses, worldliness dries up, cannot survive. Worldliness is ‘otherness’; multiplicity, hubbub, the

greedy and the gross, and all the concomitants of ignorance.

*Stream*—Sannyasins of old met many streams, bubbling through the hills and valleys, wherewith to refresh themselves. Fortunate were those who would encounter a rishi, a sage to whom the Veda had revealed itself. They drank from the incomparable stream flowing from his lips, the seeker’s, the wanderer’s reward.

*Knowledge, Truth, and Bliss*: Sat, Chit, and Ananda—the triad of terms the sages used, to give us a hint of the Indescribable. But Bliss is always last—when the stream of Truth and Knowledge has been followed and has reached the sea. *Sing high*: don’t mute this song; let it ring out, exultant. *Om Tat Sat, Om*—that is the Real.

Strike off thy fetters! Bonds that bind thee down,  
Of shining gold, or darker, baser ore;  
Love, hate—good, bad—and all the dual throng,  
Know, slave is slave, caressed or whipped, not free;  
For fetters, though of gold, are not less strong  
to bind;  
Then off with them, Sannyasin bold! Say—  
‘Om Tat Sat, Om!’

What can chain a sannyasin? Past memories, lingering family affection, concession to dissuading friends, inordinate love of the natural world’s beauty or its creatures, the dharmic and persuasive character of *sattva*. ... Swamiji is calling the monk

beyond the *gunas*, even the best of them, to a freedom totally uncharacterized by opposites. Gold chains, iron chains, all chains confine. Once he described attachment to one's monastic order as a persistent weakness.

Let darkness go; the will-o'-the-wisp that leads  
With blinking light to pile more gloom on gloom.  
This thirst for life for ever quench; it drags  
From birth to death, and death to birth, the soul.  
He conquers all who conquers self. Know this  
And never yield, Sannyasin bold! Say—

'Om Tat Sat, Om!'

Again, the *gunas*: first let go of *tamas*, darkness; then *rajas*, useful but undependable. Like the fire-fly, ever flaring up and dying down; raising hopes, only to see them dashed—thus piling gloom on gloom. These make up the thirst for life which afflicts us all. And how subtle of Swamiji to add the less familiar phrase: 'from death to birth.' What pause this gives the reader! *Rajas* moves us up to *sattva* when we work upon ourselves, when it relaxes its yen to conquer the ills and failings of 'the world' and settles down upon its self-made problems. Not only that: our sannyasin is to gain that highest knowledge that the Self, once victor, *is* the All. *Never yield*: On these heights of consciousness, of yogic absorption, he reminds us, one misstep can start an avalanche! So be alert, relax no guard, let not the mind plunge down.

'Who sows must reap,' they say, 'and cause  
must bring  
The sure effect; good, good; bad, bad; and none  
Escape the law. But whoso wears a form  
Must wear the chain.' Too true; but far beyond  
Both name and form is Atman, ever free.  
Know thou art That, Sannyasin bold! say—  
'Om Tat Sat, Om!'

In this verse Swamiji teases us a bit. What relief we feel when we arrive at the phrase, 'but far beyond ...' Painting the picture of inexorable karma and our doom, he gives us first a loophole—*they say*—and then he lifts our mind to that high bourn where law and name and the stain of sin do not exist. The Atman is what we really are.

They know not truth who dream such vacant  
dreams

As father, mother, children, wife, and friend.

The sexless Self! whose father He? whose child?

Whose friend, whose foe is He who is but One?

The Self is all in all, none else exists;

And thou art That, Sannyasin bold! Say—

'Om Tat Sat, Om!'

What! My father, mother, child, friend—all dreams? 'Dear one,' he is reminding us, 'this whole world is a dream, an Alice-in-Wonderland.' Just now we cannot face it, no doubt, surrounded as we are by those who 'love' us. Yet when the curtain comes down on the stage of life's drama, we will come to know it. But Swamiji takes us at once to the positive: the Self. There is even something liberating in the word 'sexless,' for, as one writer has noted, there is something of the monk in every one of us. A sannyasini of our Order has pointed out that he refers to the Self as 'He'; sexless? Ah, 'tis only the fault of our patriarchal language.

There is but One—The Free—The Knower—Self!

Without a name, without a form or stain.

In Him is Maya, dreaming all this dream.

The witness, He appears as nature, soul.

Know thou art That, Sannyasin bold! Say—

'Om Tat Sat, Om!'

In every verse, Swamiji throws out to us the challenge: 'Sannyasin bold!' Where today are our bold sannyasins? Where are the men like Kalyanananda, Achalananda, Prabhananda (Ketaki Maharaj), the pioneers, the venturesome? —the ones who, knowing they are but witness of this mind-dreamt universe, yet forged ahead. Are there no more frontiers?

Where seekest thou? That freedom, friend,  
this world

Nor that, can give. In books and temples vain


Thy search. Thine only is the hand that holds

The rope that drags thee on. Then cease lament,

Let go thy hold, Sannyasin bold! Say—

'Om Tat Sat, Om!'

True freedom, he reminds us, is transcendental—not to be found in the material world, nor the afterlife. Intellectuals may grumble, steeped in



their tomes, and devotees go right on saluting it in temples, hoping against hope, for external deliverance. No! says Swamiji. *Ours* is the hand that does this holding: so let go. Let will, ambition, and even aspiration roll by. Be free.

Say, 'Peace to all: From me no danger be  
To aught that lives. In those that dwell on high,  
In those that lowly creep, I am the Self in all!  
All life both here and there, do I renounce,  
All heavens and earths and hells, all hopes  
and fears.'

Thus cut thy bonds, Sannyasin bold! Say—  
'Om Tat Sat, Om!'

'Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me.' The song has covered the world now. We hear it, we sing it. Few of us are terrorists. But in how many little ways we cause danger to others! As heedless children we stepped on ants, as youth we fought, demeaned, and sneered. Now adults, gossip, acrimony, and dirty politics are our weapons. *All life both here and there, do I renounce.* There? Life in heaven, or a hell, or here once again: this is the aim of the sannyasin—an arrow straight to Freedom. Hopes and fears, the two sides of a single coin. Mirror images, so difficult to give up. 'Be perfectly hopeless,' Swamiji says in another place, 'that is the highest state.' There we are hope-less, for we already have all there is to have.

Heed then no more how body lives or goes,  
Its task is done. Let Karma float it down;  
Let one put garlands on, another kick  
This frame; say naught. No praise or blame can be  
Where praiser praised, and blamer blamed are one.  
Thus be thou calm, Sannyasin bold! Say—  
'Om Tat Sat, Om!'

Truly a 'counsel of perfection.' Directed at the *siddha*, perfected one, it mirrors the wedding vow, 'for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health ...

till death us do part.' Swamiji may have recalled the kick given to his Master by the jealous priest. And how many, many times Vivekananda was garlanded! The felt unity of praiser and praised must devastate all elation; the felt unity of blamer and blamed, all resentment.

Truth never comes where lust and fame and greed  
Of gain reside. No man who thinks of woman  
As his wife can ever perfect be;  
Nor he who owns the least of things, nor he  
Whom anger chains, can ever pass thro' Maya's  
gates.

So, give these up, Sannyasin bold! Say—  
'Om Tat Sat, Om!'

Swamiji speaks here to the sannyasin, not to the householder? Evidently. Yet is there not in the married state a similar high attainment? Intercourse without lust or aggression; legitimate ambition with no yen for fame; ownership, but without attachment? Surely. Anger? Everyone is subject to it. The sannyasin must be on guard, especially as age comes on: mind has become concentrated by sadhana, speech powerful, temper can be short. Examples are many.

Have thou no home. What home can hold thee,  
friend?  
The sky thy roof, the grass thy bed; and food  
What chance may bring, well cooked or ill,  
judge not.  
No food or drink can taint that noble Self  
Which knows Itself. Like rolling river free  
Thou ever be, Sannyasin bold! Say—  
'Om Tat Sat, Om!'

Being in truth the Atman, you are too big for any home! How can the bonds of family love and ties of youth and childhood hold you any more? Toys and dolls you've left behind. Venture forth like Vivekananda. Your sleep, your food, will be what




fortune brings: now rough, now smooth, beggars hut or prince's palace. Many hands will fill your begging bowl. All of them are His. Swamiji is no doubt hinting here of caste and race and rules of purity. Like his Master, we must sooner or later rise above them all. And must not the devotees on whom the monk depends take care to offer clean and healthy food and drink? What a fine simile closes this verse! Free as a rolling river. Flexible as water. Even the river keeps to its banks: the sannyasin too, has his parameters.

Few only know the truth. The rest will hate  
And laugh at thee, great one; but pay no heed.  
Go thou, the free, from place to place, and help  
Them out of darkness, Maya's veil. Without  
The fear of pain or search for pleasure, go  
Beyond them both, Sannyasin bold! Say—  
‘Om Tat Sat, Om!’

We have only to look at Swamiji's own life to understand the force of this verse. Perhaps his Master was the only one to know the full truth about him; he was often unaware of it himself. Detractors

slandered him, wiseacres ridiculed; he strode across this world, someone said, as if trampling high on a large ball. All sannyasins he calls ‘great ones’: that is how he felt about renunciants. And again, we have that pair of opposites to surmount—pleasure and pain.

Thus, day by day, till Karma's powers spent  
Release the soul for ever. No more is birth,  
Nor I, nor thou, nor God, nor man. The ‘I’  
Has All become, the All is ‘I’ and Bliss.  
Know thou art That, Sannyasin bold! Say—  
‘Om Tat Sat, Om!’

In trying to live the ‘life divine’ we experience from time to time windows of true freedom, glimpses of what that final state must be. The heavens open, as it were, for a bit. But only when *prabuddha* lets us go at last, can we know the end-state of this poem. *No more is birth*, so, no more is death. All separators of person from person, man from God, are lost in the All-ness of the soul, Atman lost in Brahman. Does it frighten? How can it, when Swamiji adds that golden word—Bliss! 

**H**induism has given us in the form of the *sannyasin* its picture of the ideal man. He carries within himself the dynamism of spirit, its flame-like mobility. He has no fixed abode and is bound to no stable form of living. He is released from every form of selfishness: individual, social, and national. He does not make compromises for the sake of power, individual or collective. His behaviour is unpredictable, for he does not act in obedience to the laws of the social group or the State. He is master of his own conduct. He is not subject to rules, for he has realized in himself the life which is the source of all rules and which is not itself subject to rules. The quietude of his soul is strange, for though he is tranquil within, every-

thing about him is restless and dynamic. His element is fire, his mark is movement.

The ideal man of India is not the magnanimous man of Greece or the valiant knight of medieval Europe, but the free man of spirit who has attained insight into the universal source by rigid discipline and practice of disinterested virtues, who has freed himself from the prejudices of his time and place. It is India's pride that she has clung fast to this ideal and produced in every generation and in every part of the country from the time of the rishis of the Upanishads and Buddha to Ramakrishna and Gandhi, men who strove successfully to realize this ideal.  
—S Radhakrishnan

# Swami Vivekananda and Delsarte

Dr Hema Murty

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA'S *Raja Yoga* is an inspiring and detailed commentary on the psychology of spiritual life according to Yoga-Vedanta. As part of its study, it also deals with fundamental principles of physical and mental health.

Swami Vivekananda says: 'Hatha-Yoga ... deals entirely with the physical body, its aim being to make the physical body very strong. We have nothing to do with it here, because its practices are very difficult, and cannot be learned in a day, and, after all, do not lead to much spiritual growth.' He continues: 'Many of these practices you will find in Delsarte and other teachers, such as placing the body in different postures, but the object in these is physical, not psychological.'<sup>1</sup>

Swami Vivekananda says *pranayama* is practised to obtain mastery over the 'breathing motion'. 'The end is not merely to control the breath or to make the lungs strong. That is Delsarte, not Pranayama' (2.455). *Prana* is 'the infinite, omnipresent manifesting power of this universe' (1.147). Control or *ayama* of *prana* is what we are trying to achieve through *pranayama*. By controlling our inner self, we obtain mastery over the universe. Here again Swami Vivekananda points to Delsarte as being concerned with the physical alone.

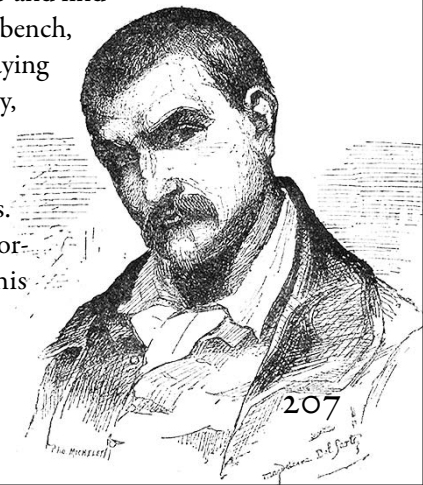
When Swami Vivekananda returned to the Alambazar Math after his first visit to the West, as part of his training of the brothers of the Math, he promoted exercises according to Delsarte. Swami Akhandananda remembers: 'He taught us some exercises according to the Delsarte method. ... For some days these Delsarte exercises were practised at the Math.'<sup>2</sup> Delsarte clearly interested Swami Vivekananda. Who was Delsarte? In this article we shall try to explore the answer to this question.

## Delsarte

François Delsarte (1811–71) was a French teacher of acting and singing, born in Solesmes, France. His childhood was one of poverty and hardship, and he was ultimately left alone in Paris, forced to fend for himself. In 1923, he was adopted by an elderly professor of music, Père Bambini, who recognized his musical talent; Bambini got him admitted into the Paris Conservatory as a vocal student in 1826. His studies continued there until 1829; but he felt the instruction he received there permanently damaged his voice. Though he would continue to perform as a singer up to 1866, he became primarily a teacher of singing and dramatic arts.<sup>3</sup>

Realizing that the instruction methods of the Conservatory had damaged his voice, his most valuable asset, Delsarte seems to have commenced an investigation into the true nature of acting and voice delivery. As this was an entirely new and uncharted area of study, Delsarte started with fundamentals. He explored the question: 'How does a human being move?' He observed people in hospitals, morgues, asylums, prisons, and art galleries. He watched children on the playground for hours. Imagine his one-pointed concentration and *shraddha*: we can picture ourselves walking through a park in central Paris in 1830 and finding Delsarte on a park bench, watching children playing and people walking by, perhaps sketching in his notebook as he observed for hours. We get an inspiring portrait of Delsarte, of his

François Delsarte



unique and fervent inquisitiveness into the question that plagued him, 'How does a human being produce good sound and move naturally?' Based on his observations, he formulated laws of aesthetic science which became the basis of his system of instruction. Unfortunately, Delsarte died in 1871 before he could publish any of his work. However, many of his students carried on the system of instruction that he founded. We should note that there was no physical fitness aspect to his training method in its original form.

Delsarte devised a method, similar to *shavasana* in yoga, in which one withdraws will power from different parts of the body in turn. For example, one places one's hand on the table and withdraws one's will power from the hand and fingers. Then one touches that hand with the other, feeling it to be like a piece of wood. Such exercises enable the student to gain great control over him- or herself, much like the exercises of hatha yoga do. In fact, a process that has been called 'instant relaxation technique' or IRT is exactly what Delsarte was describing. IRT is an exercise of hatha yoga, in which one tenses and then subsequently relaxes each body part in turn, producing a deep relaxation of the whole body.

There were many students in Paris who followed Delsarte's method. It was Delsarte's American student Steele MacKaye (1842–94) who brought the system to America. However, MacKaye expanded it, incorporating gymnastics into the teachings. Neither Delsarte nor MacKaye left a written record of their methods. That was left to Genevieve Stebbins (1857–1914) among others, one of MacKaye's students, who wrote *The Delsarte System of Expression* in 1885. The Delsarte system became a kind of sensation, and Swami Vivekananda would surely have known about it. Indeed, one of his close friends, Mrs Milward Adams, was 'a star of sorts—a talented and popular lecturer on "The Art of Expression", which art included speaking, walking, gesturing, and standing'.<sup>4</sup> He even took walking lessons from her. A newspaper clipping described her as 'an exponent of the Delsartean system and she has numbered among her pupils many a minister

and actor' (2.234). She, and perhaps others, would surely have talked about training according to Delsarte and shown Swamiji a few of these exercises.

Delsarte envisaged the body, mind, and spirit joining together to form an integrated being. He wanted complete focus on the portion of the body that needed to be summoned for action to take place. Stebbins called this 'harmonic gymnastics'.

In harmonic gymnastics, exercises were performed with rhythmic harmony to the accompaniment of suitable music. Nancy Lee Chalfa Ruyter writes about Stebbins: 'Stebbins created exercise programs for conditioning and physical expression, incorporating material from gymnastics and yoga as well as Delsarte's theory and MacKaye's "gymnastics".'<sup>5</sup>

Delsarte's original theories do begin to echo the principles of yoga, which hold that the inner world dictates the external functioning of the body. Conversely, the external body motion changes the internal world. Body and mind work on each other. Delsarte identified the basic patterns of movement which would bring forth mental, vital, or spiritual impulses. MacKaye formulated exercises to develop awareness and responsiveness of the body. The actor was to be aware of the synergy of body, mind, and spirit acting in concord.

Delsarte, in the following quote, reveals his spiritual attitude:

What an admirable thing is this mechanism of the body working in the service of the soul! With what precision it reveals the least movement of its master! What magnificent things it lays bare! Voluntarily or involuntarily, everything leads to truth under the action of the translucent light which breaks forth in the working of each of our organs! I knew that certain laws existed, that those laws proceeded from a Supreme Reason, and immense centre of light, of which each man's reason is but a single ray.<sup>6</sup>

Elizabeth Drake-Boyt notes: 'Many Delsarte exercises contain a meditative stance impelled by suggestive imagery to place the mind in the desired frame and a relaxation of the body. Only those

muscles required to execute the movement were to be engaged. Grace was a simple succession of movements that were truthful and beautiful because all that was tense or artificial had been removed.<sup>7</sup>

Drake-Boyt comments further:

The eclectic inclusion of Orientalism in American spiritual development was also reflected in the attitudes of camp revivals. Formally, the appearance and speeches of Swami Vivekananda first at the 1893 World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, and later around the United States, introduced not only Hindu religion as a faith of tolerance, but a highly moral way of secular life based on religious rituals. Informally, these ideas of the individual self as an active centerpiece between an ancestral past and a descendant future functioned in American spiritualism in a way that emphasized individual responsibility for individual health and well-being (*ibid.*).

## Dance

While Delsarte was interested in acting and oratory, his student MacKaye, who brought Delsarte's system to America, was interested in applying the principles to dance as an expressive arts medium. He explained it in this way: 'The aim of this system is to bestow upon the student an intelligent and aesthetic possession of all his physical resources of expression; to place completely under his command that marvelous instrument of emotion, the human body; to gradually develop an instinctive, spontaneous, and unconscious conformity to principles of harmony and perfection in physical motion.'<sup>8</sup>

The 'Delsarte System' did become a significant inspiration in the development of modern dance. Ruth St Denis (1878–1968), one of the pioneers of modern dance, was strongly influenced by Delsarte—and by India, which was reflected in her 1906 dance composition 'Incense'. She wrote in an unpublished book:

The dance of the future will no longer be concerned with meaningless dexterities of the body. ... Remembering that man is indeed the microcosm, the universe in miniature, the Divine Dance of the future should be able to convey with its slightest

gestures some significance of the universe. ... As we rise higher in the understanding of ourselves, the national and racial dissonances will be forgotten in the universal rhythms of Truth and Love. We shall sense our unity with all peoples who are moving to that exalted rhythm.<sup>9</sup>

The quote reflects her interest in Delsarte, and even suggests a familiarity with the teachings of Swami Vivekananda.

## Swamiji

Delsarte clearly had a spiritual viewpoint. This may be why Swami Vivekananda was attracted to his method. It was a practical way to integrate oneself before a performance. Perhaps—since he was training his brother monks to give talks—Swamiji would have found Delsarte's methodology, designed after all for actors, to be appropriate for them, more so than hatha yoga practices. Also, hatha yoga was frowned upon by Sri Ramakrishna, thus making it taboo for the brotherhood.

Swamiji was interested in building up the physiques and stamina of his brother monks so that they would not fall sick from hard work and constant lecturing. The Delsarte practices were said to make one a better orator. And the Swami Vivekananda brand of sannyasins needed to develop their physical fitness and ability to give lectures without a lot of rest in between. So we can see how Delsarte's methods could be in line with Swamiji's Vedanta.

Swamiji was a great promoter of physical exercise, having understood the body-mind-spirit connection from his study of raja yoga. But this aspect of Swamiji's teaching, it seems to me, is often ignored. Students are apt to miss the physical fitness component of contemplative life. It is impossible to meditate for any significant length of time without a strong body. Neither is it easy to follow the Gita's instruction to maintain *samatva*, equanimity, in all conditions, if the body is not fit. That does not mean that we should spend a large amount of time thinking about sports or working out in the gym. One can maintain one's fitness through a few simple yoga *asanas* and regular walks in fresh air.

We must keep in mind that Swamiji was addressing his brother monks when he advocated Delsarte, and that he was training them to give lectures on spiritual matters. Proper breathing was an essential prerequisite for this activity. It keeps the speaker fit, not only to deliver lectures properly, but to remain unaffected by the *vasanas* (psychic impulses) and vibrations of the attendees and by a rigorous lecturing schedule.


## Pranayama

The words *breathing* and *pranayama* are sometimes taken to be synonymous. They are not. A study of Swamiji's *Raja Yoga* will bring out the significant differences between the two. Swami Abhedananda too explains the difference in *How to Be a Yogi*:

Every individual, whether old or young, man or woman, is bound to get some result, if the breathing exercises be practiced faithfully for six months. By breathing exercise, however, does not mean here merely deep breathing, such as is taught by teachers of music, Delsarte, or physical culture. Deep breathing is very good for drawing a full supply of oxygen into the system and undoubtedly has its value, especially for women who wear tight dresses. Many of the diseases from which they suffer are directly traceable to a lack of the adequate quantity of oxygen necessary for organic combustion and for the maintenance of the activity of the organs. The organs of many people in this country are undeveloped, or abnormally developed, because of the unnatural clothes worn; and for all such people deep breathing will be exceedingly beneficial. But too much of it is injurious, as it inflates and strains the lungs, and, if continued, the increased development of the tissues will after a time decay and produce various troubles. Those who are taking lessons in deep breathing from inexperienced teachers should stop to consider this. By breathing exercises we mean that process by which control over the motion of the lungs and of the nerve centres as also, in the end, over the *prana* or vital energy can be acquired.<sup>10</sup>

So the goal of *pranayama* is spiritual evolution, whereas Delsarte exercises develop breathing abil-

ity and bring oxygen to muscles and brain. This is what Swamiji must have noted in his reference to Delsarte.

We can gather that a sort of cross-pollination of ideas took place during Swamiji's visits to the West. In particular, it was the arts community which welcomed new 'foreign' ideas and incorporated them into their presentations. Delsarte's ideas, having a spiritual basis, must have found their way to Swamiji through his many contacts in the arts community. In promoting these practices to his brother monks at Alambazar, Swamiji—always looking for innovative ways to further personal evolution—likely promoted the Delsarte method, as he had learned it, in order to train his spiritual brothers in the art of intense lecturing. This was one way in which they could build up their strength to carry out Swamiji's vision of spiritual evolution. 

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# Tributes in Verse to Swami Vivekananda by His Early Western Admirers

Biswaranjan Sengupta

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA proclaimed that each soul is potentially divine, and that human beings are 'children of immortal bliss'. In his Chicago address on Hinduism, delivered on 19 September 1893, Swamiji called upon his audience, 'Come up, O lions, and shake off the delusion that you are sheep; you are souls immortal, spirits free, blest and eternal.' He repeatedly stressed the Vedantic truth that human beings are essentially free, holy, pure, and perfect. Westerners, particularly Americans, were elated at Swamiji's message of the divinity of the human being. They felt elevated and effulgent at heart. Swamiji's message was so different from the preaching of sin by Christian ministers. Some Americans of Swamiji's time considered him to be their saviour: some must have felt that, while Columbus discovered only their land, Swamiji discovered their soul. Swamiji's words of spiritual leaven touched their hearts and surcharged their emotions; they adored him, admired and venerated him, and poured their feelings for him into poems of tribute. Their poems started coming out in Indian journals as early as the 1890s.

Sri Ramakrishna departed for his eternal abode on 16 August 1886; his supernal life and gospel had been unknown in the West before Swamiji's going there. But Swamiji's admirers composed poems in glorification of his guru as well. Still, Swamiji was the focus of most of the admirer's poems. After his passing away, a good number of poems came out in Indian journals as tributes from his admirers to the monk of their adoration and reverence. These poems, though not masterpieces, were rich in warmth and emotion.

We find Swamiji's Western admirers also singing

in praise of the Supreme Mother of the universe. An American nun of the Ramakrishna Order, Sister Devamata, wrote a good number of poems on spiritual themes. Known as Laura Glenn before her initiation into the Order, Devamata came to India in 1909 at the instance of her guru, Swami Paramananda, and stayed for nearly two years, enjoying close contact with Sri Sarada Devi and a number of Sri Ramakrishna's disciples. We find a record of her experiences in her book *Days in an Indian Monastery*. A collection of her poems, *The Open Portal* (1929), is dedicated thus: 'In loving memory of Srimati Saradamani Devi whose life was a perpetual song of exalted gladness.'

The Supreme Mother, Kali, inspired her poetic imagination. In a poem called 'The Great Mother', the poet sings in praise of the Supreme Mother, echoing Swamiji's composition, 'Kali the Mother':

The Great Mother of the universe  
Dances gaily Her creative dance;  
Men follow Her with slow world-weighted feet;  
Yet ever She moves in swaying rhythm.  
Let not the Mother dance alone.

The Great Mother of the universe  
Laughs aloud in glad creative joy;  
Men smile sadly with pale care-stricken lips;  
Yet ever resounds Her joyous laughter.  
Let not the Mother laugh alone.

Swamiji's admirers paid rich tributes to Sri Ramakrishna, Swamiji's spiritual teacher. After Swamiji's address at Chicago and the publication of 'A Real Mahatman', Prof. Max Müller's article on Sri Ramakrishna in the *Nineteenth Century* magazine, Indian culture and the philosophy of Vedanta started receiving greater attention in the West. Swamiji's Western admirers and devotees came to

know from him of the Great Master, Sri Ramakrishna. The principles of Vedanta, worship of God as Mother, the embodiment of Power; and Hindu traditions of worship were new to the Western mind. But after Swamiji propounded the greatness of the Hindu religion and championed the divinity inherent in humanity, people started admiring these ideas—which were reflected in Swamiji himself. Eric Hammond, an English poet and disciple of Swamiji from Wimbledon, paraphrased into English ‘a psalm by Ramakrishna’, the song ‘*Dub dub dub rupsagare amar mon*’, which is a Baul composition, much loved and often sung by Sri Ramakrishna. Titled ‘The Sea of Immortality’, it appeared in *Prabuddha Bharata* of March 1933. Two stanzas are reproduced below:

Dive deep, dive deep, dive deep  
 Into the Sea of Seas,  
 Dive deep, O Mind, nor creep  
 With hesitant, weak knees  
 On this great ocean’s shore, in fear,  
 Plunge thou, and, plunging, dare the dear  
 Delight of diving in its crystal clear.

Dive deep! Let body go  
 And heart and soul and all.  
 Dive deep, and search and know  
 The glory of thy fall,  
 Into this sea wherein true wisdom lies;  
 Wherein are stored the wondrous mysteries  
 Of Life Immortal worshipped by the wise.

The admirers and disciples of Swamiji paid tributes to great personalities of the Ramakrishna Order and dwelt on different spiritual topics. But their poetic imagination and emotion waxed yet higher when they wrote poems on Swamiji. These were songs of joy, ecstasy, and admiration for one they so esteemed.

Eric Hammond contributed a poem to the *Brahmavadin* of 10 April 1897. Swamiji would write to Sister Nivedita on 5 May 1897: ‘Mr. and Mrs. Hammond wrote two very kind letters and Mr. Hammond a beautiful poem in The *Brahmavadin*, although I did not deserve it a bit.’ The poem is titled simply ‘Swami Vivekananda’:

An ochre-coloured garment robed him round  
 As, prophet-like, he moved within our midst,  
 Flooding each seeking soul with that true light  
 That shone through all earth’s ages, and still  
 shines

Above all clouds of creeds and lack of creeds.

His voice, sonorous-sweet, or spoke or sung  
 Of The Eternal one, the God in Man,  
 The God of all, in all; a Fatherhood

Supreme; Fraternity inviolate  
 List’ning, men’s former foolish fancies fled;  
 Their little, feeble thoughts, like bubbles, burst,  
 Yet, in their bursting, caught, from that fair light  
 Fresh colour and fresh form.

His eyes, anon, flashed with the ‘scorn of  
 scorn’;

Anon, in seas of sympathy they swam.

His words melodious stirred the sluggish soul  
 Into desire to breathe the breath of life;  
 His utterance a wid’ning worship woke  
 Wherefore, for all, we thank him and we praise.

One Dr John C Wyman, of Brooklyn, submitted ‘A Tribute of Affection’ to the *Brahmavadin* of 15 July 1899. The editor noted, ‘The author, in sending us the above “tribute of appreciation for Swami Vivekananda” says—“I still love him and want him to know that my heart is filled with brotherly affection for him.”’ Here is an excerpt:

Brother Swami Vivekananda,  
 Bright pearl of the Orient sea,  
 Came here with his soul all illumined  
 By Light, Love, and Liberty.  
 He came here with greetings fraternal  
 From the mystical East to our West;  
 And from those wise Vedas inspired  
 He taught us the purest and best.

God bless our dear brother Swami,  
 May his path grow ever more bright;  
 And when his earth journey is finished  
 He be clothed in God’s garments of light.

After Swamiji ended his mortal play on 4 July 1902, his admirers the world over deeply mourned his demise, and rich tributes were paid in the Indian

and American press. Swamiji's sudden demise filled his admirer's hearts with sorrow; and this deeply felt sorrow found an outlet in poetic compositions. Some of these poems came out in Indian journals like the *Indian Mirror* and the *Brahmavadin*.

A. Christina Albers, who attended Swamiji's lectures in San Francisco, wrote 'A Tribute to Vivekananda' after Swamiji's passing away, a portion of which was published in the *Indian Mirror* of 10 July 1902; it also appeared fully in the *Brahmavadin* of July 1902. Some excerpts of this moving poem are reproduced below.

Lo! India weeps, with the sound of the death-knell tolling:

A star has faded in the Eastern sky.  
The dreaded foe, the fates of men controlling,  
Coldly refused to pass the hero by.  
Weep India of thy noblest son bereft!

Ah, genius claimed him as her very own.  
Upon his brow her glorious mark she left,  
His soul was kindred to the gods alone,  
And India gives him with a bitter groan.

And Genius sighs—while the tears of the nation  
are flowing,

And sad the melancholy Muses pine.  
But in our hearts an ardent fire is glowing  
To pay our tribute at the hero's shrine.  
Ah, you who turned the spirit's mystic tide  
And gave new life-blood unto foreign lands,  
Thy country's hero and thy nation's pride.

Oh, hear the prayers she weeping upward sends,  
And take the offering from her trembling hands.

But seasons roll by, and years will be coming  
and going.  
And mortals must go, the path for all men is the  
same.

Well have they lived who leave the world,  
bestowing

Unto posterity a hallowed name.  
Then mingle with the death knell's sombre chime  
Hope for new strength, will to delay your fears.  
His noble work will live throughout all time;  
His monument, washed in a nation's tears,  
Will be a holy shrine in future years.

Eric Hammond too put pen to paper in a moving tribute:

Broken, again, the golden bowl. Again  
Loosened the silver cord. Lo! once again  
The spirit of The Lord has rent earth's bonds;  
And that embodiment of the divine,  
Known among men as Vivekananda,  
Is known no more forever. It has passed!

Throughout the world's domain, homes, here  
and there,  
Hold hearts that ache. Tears fall and sobs  
resound

For he who was our Teacher is no more!

Our Teacher! nay, our Father, Lover, Friend!

After Swami Vivekananda's passing away, a beautiful temple was constructed on the grounds of Belur Math, consecrated to his memory. Ever-increasing numbers of Swamiji's admirers visit this holy shrine, and their tributes to him in verse appear from time to time in various journals. Dr Peter Boike, an American devotee of Swamiji, visited this shrine and was inspired to write 'At the Shrine of Swami Vivekananda,' which appeared in *Prabuddha Bharata* of January 1934.

Sleep on thou holy one  
Upon the sacred spot.  
Thy life has not been in vain,  
Thy teachings have not been for naught,  
Thy voice has been heard in far distant lands,  
Thy spirit has encircled the universe;  
Thy children come to thee from far and near  
To pay homage to thy sacred name.  
Oh what ineffable joy fills my heart  
To be blessed, to be privileged  
To bow at thy blessed feet.

Swamiji himself was a great poet. He wrote poems and composed songs; even his prose is rich in poetic style and diction. His personality, sharp intellect, broad heart, warmth in language, and love for humanity—all these inspired many of his admirers—both Eastern and Western—to express their love, reverence, and gratitude in poetic compositions dedicated to him. Surely they will continue to do so for a long time to come.





# Sri Ramakrishna and Avatarahood

Swami Samarpanananda

(Continued from the previous issue)

## How to Know an Avatara?

THE divine Incarnation, as explained in devotional literature, is the phenomenon of God manifesting himself in human form, taking the help of his own inscrutable veiling power called *maya*. So, the very nature of an Incarnation makes it virtually impossible to know him. The very power that enables the divine to incarnate on earth conceals the Incarnation's divinity from ordinary people. This is the paradox.

And yet, we are taught—and also believe intuitively—that there have been Incarnations. We need a benchmark, a method of gauging, or at least glimpsing, the immensity of their character. Their powers and deeds may be beyond the ken of ordinary beings, but we should still somehow be able to grasp the greatness of their personalities.

There are two characteristics we may look for in the lives of Incarnations. These are the root and the fruit of spiritual life. At the root lies *adhikāra*, qualification, which in case of ordinary humans involves *sadhana*, spiritual practice. The *Vedānta-sāra* delineates four limbs of this *adhikāra*, the *sādhana-catustaya*. The primary qualifications are utter distaste for anything worldly, and a burning desire for God. We see these burning like a brilliant light in the lives of every Incarnation. It is not the number of years in *sadhana* that counts for achievement—and in case of some Incarnations such *sadhana* may not be very prominent—but the intensity. Water may be heated for years at ninety-five degrees centigrade, but it will never come to a boil. If heated for even a few minutes at a hundred degrees, the water starts boiling vigorously. We find several Incarnations performing intense *sadhana* for a time. Although the followers of an Incarnation may try to emulate him by attempting

the intense *sadhana* that their master did, they are unable to approach the vastness of the Incarnation's capacity for *sadhana*.

The tree of *sadhana* invariably produces the fruit of compassion. The *Bhagavadgita* describes this as '*sarvabhūta-hite ratāḥ*, engaged in the well-being of all creatures'.<sup>5</sup> The prophets and Incarnations of God are often described as 'an ocean of compassion', their 'hearts melting at the suffering of others'. As we study their lives and actions, we gradually fathom the intensity of their compassion: to take birth and suffer willingly for the benefit of humankind can only spring from a vastness of compassion.

## The Purpose of the Avatara

The avatara is not a scholar, social worker, philanthropist, or human-rights activist, though his (or her) activities may sometimes make him appear that way. What, then, does the avatara do? Why does the avatara come?

An answer can be found in the riddle of the three H's in Sri Ramakrishna's life—Hriday, Hazra, and Haladhari. All three were relatives of Sri Ramakrishna, lived at the Dakshineswar temple with him, were witness to his superhuman achievements through *sadhana*, and were quite dear to him; he tried to help all three realize the truth. Yet, it is painful to reflect on their condition. All three seemed to be impervious to Sri Ramakrishna's influence, and continued to struggle in the mire of confusion and ignorance. Why did they fail to make any spiritual progress, though having Sri Ramakrishna's holy company? People like Latu (Swami Adbhutananda), an illiterate servant boy, Girish Ghosh, a dramatist and drunkard, and Binodini, an actress, became blessed along with Naren and Rakhal (Swa-

mis Vivekananda and Brahmananda) and others. The study of exceptions to a rule or system can reveal the pattern that underlies it. So many persons who came in close contact with Sri Ramakrishna became blessed, and yet these three failed. Why? These three are the exceptions who can reveal the role of an Incarnation on earth.

One well-known statement regarding the role of an Incarnation is found in the Gita: '*Paritrāṇāya sādhubhūnām ... [I come] for the protection of the good and the destruction of the wicked*' (4.8). This definition is sometimes stretched too far, and even Buddha, Jesus, and Sri Ramakrishna, who never raised a finger to harm anyone, are made to appear to have conquered evil physically. Sri Chaitanya is even supposed to have summoned the Sudarshana Chakra, the celestial discus, to eliminate the ruffians Jagai and Madhai. We do not know how far this story is true, but we can safely say that incidents of physically punishing the wicked are extremely rare in the recorded lives of most of the recent Incarnations.

Acharya Shankara, in the introduction to his commentary on the Gita, says that the Incarnation takes birth to re-establish the twofold Vedic dharma of action and renunciation, *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti*—which leads to worldly prosperity, *abhyudaya*, and the highest good or liberation, *niḥśreyasa*, and maintains the stability of the world order—when it declines. Indeed, we see that the society in which an Incarnation takes birth blossoms in every sphere—not the spiritual alone—and fields of literature, drama, science, and economics all prosper. But the real essence of the Incarnation's help is described in a beautiful sentence by Acharya Shankara: '*bhaumasya brahmaṇo brāhmaṇatvasya rakṣaṇārtham*'; [the Lord] incarnates to preserve and protect brahmanahood which is Brahman manifest on earth.<sup>16</sup>

This statement is a bit tricky. The word *brāhmaṇa* may arouse in us the idea of a man with sacred thread, tuft, and a forehead smeared with ash, sandal paste, or vermilion, going about haughtily in temples and places of worship with a keen

eye to scoring gifts from devotees. The term may bring to mind snobbery, exclusiveness, and high-handedness. In short, people are wary of the term.

It need not be so. This wariness is due to a misunderstanding of the word. The very scriptures that codify and group people into castes define a brahmana as one whose mind is fixed unceasingly in the thought of Brahman, the non-dual absolute Reality. One may wonder how many caste brahmanas would pass muster.

### Caste

One's caste was originally to be determined by the tendencies predominant in one's personality. Thus, depending on which way one leaned—towards *paricaryā*, serving others, *vāṇijya*, trade, *īśvarabhāva*, rulership, or *jñāna-vijñāna-āstikya*, knowledge, realization of truth, and faith—one would be considered a shudra, vaishya, kshatriya, or brahmana respectively. With the passage of time, caste became a crystallized system perpetuating privilege and exclusiveness, and the brahmanical characteristics degenerated into mere bookish learning. But it is not difficult to see that every person throughout the world falls into one of these categories. People can be categorized as striving for that which is *kartavya*, to be done; *prāptavya*, to be attained, *bhoktavya*, to be enjoyed, or *jñātavya*, to be known. It is not difficult to guess which tendency defines which caste.

It is not that these tendencies are set in stone. Every society, and even every person, has all these tendencies present in him or her; and most people pass through different stages in their lifetimes, when different tendencies predominate. Some poorly integrated personalities even take up the different roles on a daily basis.

Perfect tranquillity, clarity, and light, equated with pure *sattva*, is the ideal state of a brahmana. Its opposite, *tamas*, is characterized by inertness and dullness of body and mind. Everyone and everything in this universe falls somewhere between these two extremes. This implies that society will always be divided into these four castes. Take, for

example, a large corporate computer manufacturer. The company will have scientists, executives, shareholders, and also ordinary workers associated with it, all doing their part to maintain the balance and social order of the company. Based on the nature of their work and the mindset it requires, they can be considered the brahmanas, kshatriyas, vaishyas, and shudras of the company.

There is a fifth category, that of sannyasins, who are said to be beyond all these tendencies. From the standpoint of society, sannyasins belong not to any caste, but to the fourth ashrama or station in life. Anyone is free to join the fold of sannyasins by giving up his or her duties, responsibilities, and privileges. But speaking purely from the standpoint of attitude, sannyasins do form a sort of caste. A true sannyasin has the capability to take up any of the aforesaid four tendencies, but outgrows them by sheer mental prowess. He or she does not escape, but outgrows. Acharya Shankara, in discussing the role of an Incarnation, uses the term brahmana in this sense of outgrowing all mental tendencies.

For the sake of convenience, we will continue here to use the term 'brahmana' to denote one who has attained the highest mental state, in which one remains absorbed in thought of the supreme Reality. The term 'sannyasin' is equivalent.

### Satya Yuga

The idea that in the beginning there was perfection, and that somehow there has been a fall from that state, is popular in every religion. In Hinduism also it is believed that in the beginning there was only one caste, that of the brahmanas. That period was known as Satya Yuga. The goal is to recover that ideal state of brahmanahood, as suggested by Acharya Shankara. Everyone is moving towards that ideal state of Satya Yuga, in which people will have the predominant character of outgrowing all mundane mentality. The Incarnation pushes society in this direction. And Swami Vivekananda has said, 'From the very date that he [Sri Ramakrishna] was born, has sprung the Satya-Yuga.'<sup>7</sup>

A caste brahmana has no advantage over persons

born in other castes in becoming a true brahmana, a true sannyasin. The three H's—Hriday, Hazra, and Haladhari—exemplify this perfectly. All three were brahmanas, but Hriday wanted to lord over Sri Ramakrishna, Hazra wanted to get material benefits, and Haladhari wanted scholarship. None of them wanted what Sri Ramakrishna really stood for—the real brahmanahood, characterized by the renunciation of these traits. That is why they failed.

The power to give up everything is very rare in society. An Incarnation gives a boost to this power, but it dies out quickly after his passing away. True brahmanahood then degenerates to brahmanahood as commonly understood and becomes synonymous with learning and *sattva*. However, the force responsible for the progress towards or away from *sattva*, known as *rajas*, is present in everything and everybody in varying degrees. The Incarnations give a general push in the psychic energy, which makes a truly noble mind desire to break free of relative existence, to get beyond the power of *sattva* and attain liberation. For the rest, the push is in *rajas* towards the higher state of *sattva*. The Incarnations remove the Zenoic technicalities from religion and give a push to all those who come under the field of their influence towards brahmanahood—a push towards betterment of every kind. The chosen few give their all for realizing the spiritual truth that lies beyond every mental orbit. The rest move upward in the scale of psychic caste of doing, achieving, enjoying, or knowing. In a word, Incarnations change the quality of people's lives.

An object—as, for instance, an electron, or a planet—will remain in its trajectory or energy state unless given a push by some external force. The human mind works in a similar way, following a fixed trajectory or pattern; it is impossible for a mind to make a quantum leap to a higher trajectory without external input. A teacher can give the push needed to bring a child out of ordinary ignorance. But to rise above the fundamental ignorance, our identification with the body and mind, greater than human power is required.

Scientists, writers, and other thinkers can ef-

fect changes in their respective areas, but it is only for an Incarnation to give a thorough push to the entire social system. When the Incarnations are gone, their words, recorded as scripture, as well as the lives of the disciples who embody their teachings, serve as the medium of their boosting power. As people come under the influence of this power, the power acts through them also; more and more people are pulled up, till finally the saving power is directed even towards animals and trees. So environmentalists are also recognized. In brief, the entire social consciousness gets a boost.

Here lies the true power of an Incarnation. A philosopher, saint, or social worker can also start a cycle of virtue by his or her acts and words, but the power will be limited, and soon after his or her death, will quickly fade away. In contrast, an Incarnation's power is like a tidal wave, bringing enormous changes. That power is wielded sometimes without even spoken or written words—his mere will, a glance, or a touch is sufficient to start the avalanche of change. And that avalanche does not peter out with his passing away, but gains in force. Thus, while Jaimini, Kanada, and Gautama have been confined to the textbooks, Buddha, Rama, and Krishna continue to hold sway over the masses. There is something subtle and special that keeps their impetus ever green. The Incarnations never fade away from societal memory. Their coming etches its impact on the social consciousness.

### **Incarnation and the Common Person**

With the passage of time, the Incarnation's message does get diluted. The Gita notes it: '*Sa kāleneha mahatā ...* That yoga, by long lapse of time, declined in this world.'<sup>8</sup> The power that could impel even a doer to go beyond every kind of desire, is then unable to effect a transformation. Ever more people lose the desire for renunciation. The society is slowly captured by the exploiters and the exploited—the enjoyers and the doers.

But religion does not die. It is preserved like an expensive garment brought out on very special occasions and afterwards hurriedly replaced in the

wardrobe. The days of ceremonies, rituals, celebrations, and festivals are the days when religion comes out of the closet, is put on briefly, and put away hastily, lest it get soiled. It is never used to save oneself from the heat and cold, pleasure and pain, or laughter and tears of life. That is why we so rarely enjoy the peace and joy of the blessed.

Buddha saw an old man, a sick man, a dead man, and a monk. His mind was ignited, and began to burn with the pursuit of enlightenment. If we go today to any hospital run by missionaries or monks, we meet the same scenes, and that too at the same time. But no one becomes a Buddha. Why?

One reason lies in our accepting an Incarnation as a person but not as a personality; as personal, not as impersonal; as embodied, but not as *bhāva*, Spirit. The scriptures are to be treated not as literary masterpieces but as guidance, not as flights of fancy but as impelling force, not as poetic beauty but as pointers to the truth. The real *śaraṇāgati*, self-surrender, lies not in parroting what one has heard from others, but surrendering to *bhāva*. The three H's—Hriday, Hazra, and Haldhari—thought of Sri Ramakrishna as a person, not as *bhāva*; hence they could not derive benefit from his company.

On the contrary, those who saw Sri Ramakrishna as an embodiment of *bhāva*, spiritual ideas, became blessed, no matter who they were, sinner or saint, low caste or high. The power of *bhāva* extended infinitely, covering brahmanas and untouchables, drunkards and the pious, actresses and veiled ladies, scholars and the unlettered. Infinite means that. Unending.

Let us catch hold of the *bhāva* of Sri Ramakrishna—or any Incarnation—and propel ourselves towards the real brahmanahood—far beyond doing, achieving, enjoying, and knowing.

This is the path. This is the goal.



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# Justice and Equality

Dr Lekshmi Ramakrishnaiyer

THE success of a society lies in mutual trust and cooperation among its individuals. If people do not cooperate, then that society needs some authority to bring individual interests into line with the public interest; such an authority is the state. One of the basic functions of the state is to project justice.

The term 'justice' brings to mind catching the criminal and making him or her 'pay' for the crime. This is often called *retributive justice*. But justice refers to something more—something which can be termed *distributive justice*.

'Distributive justice' brings with it the concept of equality. It is not wrong to identify justice as that which safeguards the equality of human beings. Then it can be said that that society is just where its members are equal. But if this is so, then in what ways is the standard of equality maintained? Can justice and equality always go together? For instance, should the person who uses his or her wealth to the benefit of others receive no more than one who throws his or her money away on gambling or drinking?

## **Justice in Western Philosophical Perspectives**

The first great Western theories of justice go back to Plato and Aristotle. For Aristotle—as for Plato—different people have different roles, and to treat unequals equally is as unjust as to treat equals unequally. For Aristotle, justice is proportional. Justice in transactions between people is a sort of equality and injustice a sort of inequality, the degree of injustice being proportional to the extent that inequality is believed to have been perpetrated. 'It makes no difference whether a good man has defrauded a bad man or a bad man a good one ... the

law looks only to the distinctive character of the injury and treats the parties as equal, if one is in the wrong and the other is being wronged, and if one inflicted injury and the other has received it. Therefore, this kind of injustice being an inequality, the judge tries to equalise it.'<sup>1</sup>

Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) developed a theory that began with equality as 'a natural fact' and took justice to be that which 'assured peace and security to all', enforced by the government. Several years later, John Locke (1632–1704) and David Hume (1711–1776) argued a similar theory of justice. For both of them the ultimate criterion of justice was utility, the public interest, and therefore, the satisfaction of interests of, at least, most citizens. But utilitarian justice is in an awkward position when it chooses to serve the public interest at the intolerable expense of and injustice to a small number of individuals or even a single individual.

A very different conception of justice dates back to Kant (1724–1804), for whom respect for everyone's rights is to be given more importance than public interest. In its modern conception, this view is well defended by John Rawls (1921–2002) in his profound work, *A Theory of Justice* (1971). Rawls essentially defends two principles in order of priority.<sup>2</sup> First, each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others; and second, social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both (a) reasonably expected to be to everyone's advantage, and (b) attached to positions and offices open to all.

These principles express justice as a complex of three ideas: liberty, equality, and reward for services contributing to the common good.

The main theme of Rawls's work is an attempt

to tie the concept of justice with that of equality. Against the conservative suggestion that people are equal in legal rights and opportunities alone, without any right to material goods and social services, he argues that a just society will consider the welfare of the worst-off members of society as an obligation. Here he differs with Mill and the utilitarians who would say that such help is a matter of utility; for Rawls, it is more like a Kantian duty. Again, this is different from the position of socialism which holds that all property should be shared. His view is that it is obligatory to help out the worst-off members of society, but nowhere does he suggest that all people ought to have, therefore, equal wealth and property. 'Justice, in other words, does not equate fair distribution with equal distribution. Equality becomes a far more complex notion, therefore, than [what] simple egalitarianism often takes it to be' (*ibid.*).

The two principles suggested by Rawls 'presuppose that the social structure can be divided into two more or less distinct parts, the first principle applying to the one and the second to the other. They distinguish between those aspects of the social system that define and secure the equal liberties of citizenship and those that specify and establish social and economic inequalities.'<sup>3</sup> The basic liberties of citizens include freedom of speech and assembly, the right to vote and to be eligible for public office, liberty of conscience and freedom of thought, the right to hold personal property, and freedom from arbitrary arrest and seizure as defined by the concept of the rule of law. These liberties are all required to be equal by the first principle. The citizens of a just society are to have equality in basic rights.

The second principle applies to the distribution of income and wealth and to the design of organizations that make use of differences in authority and responsibility. While the distribution of wealth and income need not be equal, it must be to everyone's advantage, and the positions of authority and offices of command must be accessible to all.

The two principles are a special case of a more general conception of justice which can be ex-

pressed as follows: 'All social values—liberty and opportunity, income and wealth, and the bases of self-respect—are to be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution of any, or all, of these values is to everyone's advantage' (607). What follows then is that injustice implies inequalities that are not to the benefit of all. In other words, inequalities are permissible when they maximize or at least contribute to the long term expectations of the least fortunate group in society.

Now one may ask, is equality the primary concern of justice? Even Rawls admits that a society in which everyone has exactly equal shares of social goods is impossible. We may imagine a situation in which all material goods would be collected and catalogued by the state, then redistributed to every citizen in precisely equal shares. This situation seems intolerable to us. Why should it be so, if it establishes the equality that justice demands? It is not simply that we might lose our own goods—what bothers us at the first instance is the very idea of anyone, including political authority, intruding into our lives and exerting such power. It also violates something very basic to justice, namely, the rights we have to our possessions. Many philosophers have become increasingly aware of another kind of right, known as entitlement, which gives rise to a very different kind of theory of justice.

The original entitlement theory was developed by John Locke, who argued for the right to private property. Locke's theory has been, in recent times, been updated considerably and argued forcefully by Robert Nozick (1938–2002). The basic idea underlying this theory puts the right to private property first and foremost and couples with it a deep scepticism as to the wisdom or fairness of government. Nozick argues against any attempt to set 'patterns' of fair distribution, for the enforcement of any such pattern must result in the violation of people's rights.

Rawls makes the noteworthy point that a society is just only if its members themselves affirm and uphold the correct principles of justice. They apply the principles of justice in their daily lives

and achieve a sense of their own justice in doing so.<sup>4</sup> In other words, the justice of a society is not exclusively a function of its legislative structure, of its legal rules, but also of the choices people make within these rules. A society requires not just coercive rules, but also an ethos of justice that informs individual choices. In the absence of such an ethos, inequalities will obtain that do not enhance the condition of the worst off: the required ethos promotes a more equitable distribution of wealth than what the rules of the economic game by themselves can secure. An example of such ethos that had gained currency, albeit a controversial one, in the last century is the 'Protestant work ethic', whose stress on self-denial, hard work, and investment of assets surplus to needs is supposed to make the worst off as well off as possible.

### Justice in Indian Philosophical Perspectives

In India, social and political thinking are subservient to religion and philosophy. The Vedas, Upanishads, and Dharmashastras provide us with certain basic political rights and duties. The *Arthashastra* of Kautilya, Bhagavadgita, Ramayana, 'Shantiparva' of the Mahabharata, and also several Buddhist writings give a good account of social and political insights of ancient thinkers. The central theme is dharma, which stands for righteousness as well as justice. The ideals of dharma, when put into practice, render impossible the emergence of such philosophical problems as the individual versus the state or politics versus ethics.

The conception of the human being as Atman establishes the dignity and sanctity of every individual. The idea that the human spirit is fundamental and that for its realization all social and political allurements and fears are to be transcended is a very significant ingredient of Hindu social psychology.

Interestingly, there seems to be no specific word in Sanskrit for the modern concept of justice. Dharma, *vyavahara* (lawsuits) and *danda* (punishment) are used to express the idea of justice according to the particular context. Dispensing justice in Hindu thought means arranging matters so as

to ensure the victory of dharma over *adharma* or *satya* over *asatya*.<sup>5</sup>

The social theory of *varna* implies a vertical scale: the natural hierarchy. But this does not mean that people are essentially unequal. Indian scriptures again and again point to the spiritual equality of all people. People in fact feel unequal in so far as they cannot yet manifest spiritual force. Inequality arises only in creation, in time and space, bringing differentiation of form and function. 'The higher the degree of realization ... the greater the manifestation of this oneness or unity, which if applied to society is a synonym of sociality', avers G H Mees.<sup>6</sup>

Swami Vivekananda's thoughts shed light on the concept of justice and equality. The practical Vedanta of Vivekananda offers exalted principles for the reconstruction of society. His supreme faith in Vedanta led him to profess the harmony between the individual and the social life, freedom of each individual and nation, and human equality and unity. As Vedanta makes no distinction between the one and the many—that is, the individual and the society—it emphasizes that mutual relations are to be based on equality of rights and opportunities.

In Vivekananda's philosophy, liberty is interchangeable with equality. Liberty means freedom from all those shackles that hinder the true nature of an individual: 'Freedom in all matters, i.e. advance towards Mukti, is the worthiest gain of man. ... Those social rules which stand in the way of the unfoldment of this freedom are injurious, and steps should be taken to destroy them speedily. Those institutions should be encouraged by which men advance in the path of freedom.'<sup>7</sup> These shackles are created by ignorance; ignorance leads to all sorts of privileges and inequalities. Vivekananda says: 'This is the bane of human nature, the curse upon mankind, the root of all misery—this inequality. This is the source of all bondage, physical, mental, and spiritual' (4.329). Vedantic equality implies equal advantages in social life, or more precisely, equal opportunities for all. This means that there should be equality of status and of opportunity necessary for individual development in every

social group: 'It is our natural right to be allowed to use our own body, intelligence, or wealth according to our will, without doing any harm to others; and all the members of a society ought to have the same opportunity for obtaining wealth, education, or knowledge' (5.145).

Nevertheless, Vivekananda says that equality of opportunity does not imply lifeless homogeneity. He says: 'The whole universe is a play of unity in variety, and of variety in unity. The whole universe is a play of differentiation and oneness; the whole universe is a play of the finite in the Infinite' (1.433). What is necessary and can certainly be attained is the elimination of privileges, the enjoyment of advantage by one over another: 'That is really the work before the whole world. In all social lives, there has been that one fight in every race and in every country. The difficulty is not that one body of men are naturally more intelligent than another, but whether this body of men, because they have the advantage of intelligence, should take away even physical enjoyment from those who do not possess that advantage. The fight is to destroy that privilege' (1.435).

Fraternity implies common enjoyment of all equipment provided by common and cooperative effort. The purpose of fraternal cooperation is to foster the growth and personal development of each and all. Vivekananda, superseding the ideal of universal brotherhood by universal selfhood, gives the ideal of fraternity a high position. For him, fraternity is the realistic way of life—the dharma. A fully enlightened person feels one with the whole of humanity; therefore international cooperation is a part of this dharma. The proper role of the state as the agent of society lies in promoting this cooperation.

Vivekananda points out that 'wisdom, knowledge, wealth, men, strength, prowess, and whatever else nature gathers and provides us with, are all only for diffusion, when the moment of need is at hand. We often forget this fact, put the stamp of *'mine only'* upon the entrusted deposits, and *pari passu*, we sow the seed of our own ruin!' (4.464).

**Ay, if there is anything in the Gita** that I like, it is these two verses, coming out strong as the very gist, the very essence, of Krishna's teaching—'He who sees the Supreme Lord dwelling alike in all beings, the Imperishable in things that perish, he sees indeed. For seeing the Lord as the same, everywhere present, he does not destroy the Self by the Self, and thus he goes to the highest goal.' ...

Wherever there is evil and wherever there is ignorance and want of knowledge, I have found out by experience that all evil comes, as our scriptures say, relying upon differences, and that all good comes from faith in equality, in the underlying sameness and oneness of things. This is the great Vedantic ideal.

—Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, 3.193–4

Similarly, Mahatma Gandhi advocated individual trusteeship to ward off class conflict by making the relationship between the capitalists and the masses healthier and purer. He appealed to the rich to share their wealth with the poor voluntarily, on spiritual considerations.

Vivekananda reminds us that the cause and effect are one. As the individual is the cause and the society or state the effect, the spiritual unity of humans that Vedanta propounds is bound to get reflected in the mutual dependence of social and political interests of various communities. Vivekananda's concept of a stable society therefore privileges class-cooperation over class-conflict. Moreover, he emphasizes that mutual relations are to be based on equality of rights and opportunities: 'The individual who realizes the necessity and reality of unity of life, never negates social interests, and society too never stands in the way of individual growth.'<sup>8</sup> Vivekananda therefore holds that there exists no inherent conflict or duality between individual and society, for if the individual knows his divine nature, the conflict between the two is automatically resolved.

Vivekananda holds that the individual serves society and becomes one with it not because of social compulsion but because of his or her innate urge for promoting social good as an ethical self-



**'Liberty of thought and action'** is the only condition of life, of growth and well-being.' Where it does not exist, the man, the race, the nation must go down.

Caste or no caste, creed or no creed, any man, or class, or caste, or nation, or institution which bars the power of free thought and action of an individual—even so long as that power does not injure others—is devilish and must go down.


—*Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 5:29

obligation.<sup>9</sup> Here Vivekananda and Rawls seem to come very close. But the philosophical presuppositions underlying their positions are very different. The establishment of freedom and equality can never be successfully accomplished on the basis of a mere political or economic view of humanity or by mere political or economic methods. The urge for freedom and equality is a spiritual urge. This is the logic behind Vivekananda's view of equality and justice, which is absent in the case of Rawls.

Again, Vivekananda argues that if there is inequality in nature, still there must be equal chance for all or, if greater for some and less for others, the weaker should be given more chance than the strong: 'If the Brahmin has more aptitude for learning on the ground of heredity than the Pariah, spend no more money on the Brahmin's education, but spend all on the Pariah. Give to the weak, for there all the gift is needed. If the Brahmin is born clever, he can educate himself without help. If the others are not born clever, let them have all the teaching and teachers they want. This is justice and reason as I understand it.'<sup>10</sup> Vivekananda actually goes a step further and suggests that the poor and historically oppressed must be provided 'a better chance in this unequal fight' for benefits, because 'a redistribution of pain and pleasure is better than always the same persons having pains and pleasures. ... Let every dog have his day in this miserable world' (6:382). Here Vivekananda is going beyond 'distributive justice' and promoting a form of justice that may be called *corrective*, that aims at undoing historical wrongs. It is worth noting that independent India has taken major steps in this direction.

## Conclusion

The idea that people are equal and that everyone should be treated equally, that people have natural or human rights which no individual and no government can take away from them, that people should equally share the material goods of society—these have all been the subject of constant debate and sometimes wars and revolutions. It may seem that equality is the very criterion for judging a society as just. But practically speaking—as is clear from the views of Vivekananda and Rawls—inequalities obtain even in a just society. But such inequalities are acceptable only on the ground that they work for the advantage of all and not for the privilege of any.

Thus it may be said that justice is a very complex notion which is neither equality nor liberty—nor both—in the social or political usage of the term. It is something which is the outcome of a deep rooted realization of the equality and liberty of all in the spiritual dimension. That is the basis of justice—and all social or political systems should rest upon this spiritual dimension of the human being. 

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# Reminiscences of Sri Ramakrishna

Trailokyanath Dev

**O**UR respected teacher Brahmananda Keshab Chandra Sen once went to the Belgharia garden house to practise spiritual disciplines in solitude. We went with him and met Sri Ramakrishna there. Sri Ramakrishna was very fond of me.

Mahendranath Gupta wrote *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, and some of his other disciples have published many spiritual teachings of their Master. I have no intention of reiterating those teachings, but I would like to briefly share some of my conversations with him that I consider valuable to the public.

Endowed with an extraordinary divine power, Sri Ramakrishna was born into a brahmana family in a small village in the Hooghly district. He did not have much education. In those days the village boys would learn some basic things in school, but Sri Ramakrishna learned very little even of that. His elder brother was a priest in Rani Rasmani's Kali temple at Dakshineswar, so he moved there to learn worship from his brother. From his childhood he had no interest in worldly pleasures and wealth. Sensing renunciation in his character, his mother and brother arranged his marriage to bind him to family life. 'Man proposes, but God disposes.' God shattered their plot, making him an all-renouncing monk and employing him in the service of humanity. He soon gave up performing worship in the temple and devoted himself to prac-

tising sadhana in solitude.

When Keshab Chandra heard about the holy man named Ramakrishna who was living at Dakshineswar, he invited him to the Belgharia garden. Both were attracted to each other, and they established a strong spiritual relationship. From then on, Sri Ramakrishna began to visit the Brahmo Samaj. The preachers and members of the Brahmo Samaj became very drawn to Sri Ramakrishna. He was extremely pleased to visit the Adi Brahmo Samaj of Maharshi Devendranath Tagore. When these events took place, the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj had not come into existence, and I am not sure whether Naren Datta—who later became Vivekananda and was adored by all—had yet been born.

Sri Ramakrishna was a man of quiet nature. Both men and women were drawn to him, even after hearing him speak just once. I had the privilege of hearing his spiritual talks for many years, and I never once heard him criticize or defame any religious organization. He considered people of all faiths to be his own. He always dwelt in the realm of spirituality. Although he had little formal education, he taught from his own spiritual experience and divine wisdom, and drew examples from various scriptures. The main characteristic of his teaching was that he used day-to-day examples that touched the hearts of common people. He stuttered while talking, and he was completely indifferent to his attire. Most of the time he was so absorbed in God that he did not notice if his cloth was dropping from his body or if he had his shoes on, but somehow or other he kept himself covered.

I always saw Hriday, a worker of the Kali temple and a nephew of Sri Ramakrishna, engaged in serving him. Sri Ramakrishna often used the word *shala* (rascal) when addressing Hriday or some vis-

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Trailokyanath Dev was a member of the Brahmo Samaj and a faithful devotee of Keshab Chandra Sen. His Bengali book *Atiter Brahmo Samaj* (Calcutta: Sadharan Brahmo Samaj, 1979) contains a chapter on Sri Ramakrishna titled 'Ramakrishna Paramahansa O Brahmo Samaj', selected portions of which have been presented here in translation.

iting religious seekers. One day I asked him, 'Sir, why do you use that word "rascal" for some people who come here?' He replied, 'You see, some of these people come here out of curiosity and disturb me. How many people sincerely want to hear about God? They hear what I say through one ear, and it goes out through the other. So I use that word to test their sincerity.'

Sri Ramakrishna had a special talent for evaluating people. By examining someone's face he could understand why that person had come to him. When worldly and hypocritical people came to him, he would use harsh words to get rid of them. One day I asked him, 'Sir, why do you try to drive them away?' He replied, 'They love "woman and gold". They don't think of God. They hear spiritual talk through one ear and it goes out through the other. There is a saying, "A cat loves fish but hates to wet its paws." Similarly, these people want to catch fish without touching water. They present fancy colourful saris to their wives, buy all types of perfumes and cosmetics for them, and decorate them with jewellery; and yet they come to hear about God. Is God so easily accessible that if they listen to me once they will become religious and see Him?'

I said, 'Sir, we are also involved with lust and gold. Why don't you drive *us* away?' Sri Ramakrishna replied, 'You are different from those people. You have some longing in your heart, and moreover, you are simple and unselfish. One day you will be able to renounce lust and gold, but those people will never succeed. Look at Shivanath [Shastri], how he has sacrificed his self-will.' Thus I heard so many wonderful teachings from that great soul that I can't remember them all. I am just recording a few of his precious teachings here that are perhaps not known to his disciples.

Sri Ramakrishna loved kirtan [devotional singing]. His voice was extremely sweet. While talking he stuttered, but it did not happen when he sang during kirtan. He was a devotee of the Divine Mother Kali and mainly sang songs about Her. While singing kirtan he would often go into ecstasy and lose outer consciousness. I saw him in samadhi

many times. The only way to bring him back to the normal plane was to chant 'Om' or 'Om Brahma'. Amazingly, he would regain consciousness when someone repeated 'Om Brahma' a few times in his ear. The Sadharan Brahma Samaj was established when I was living with Vijay Krishna and Umesh Chandra at 28 Jhamapukur Street. Sri Ramakrishna would quite often visit us with Naren and sing kirtan with Vijaykrishna Goswami. The congregation would be overwhelmed when they observed his exuberant love and devotion. Alas, can we ever see again that divine play of devotees?

Back then, on the one side there were Keshab Chandra, Vijaykrishna, and the Brahma preachers, and on the other was Sri Ramakrishna. Their union brought a wonderful current of love and devotion to the Brahma Samaj. Sri Ramakrishna was very fond of the Brahma devotees and would attend their festivals. He would invariably attend the annual Brahma festival at Manilal Mallick's house in Sinduriapati, Calcutta. It was conducted by either Keshab Chandra Sen or Shivanath Shastri. By thus attending the prayer services of the Brahma Samaj, Sri Ramakrishna became familiar with their beliefs. One day he said to me, 'Trailokya, your prayer service is good, but I don't like one thing.' I asked, 'What don't you like?' He replied, 'You flatter God too much. I don't care for glorifying God with all his attributes.' I said, 'You see, if the worshippers want to worship God, they must understand his real nature well. That is why the preachers describe his attributes elaborately in simple language.' He remarked, 'It is not necessary to eulogize so much.'

One evening I went to Dakshineswar and found Sri Ramakrishna handsomely attired in a black-bordered cloth and a pair of shining slippers. I was amazed seeing him dressed in that manner and stood there for a while. He said to me, 'Today that rascal Hriday has dressed me like a dandy. Please sit here.' When I sat down, he began to explain his dandyism. He said, 'You see, before one opens an unripe jackfruit, one should rub one's fingers with oil so that the glue-like juice will not stick to them. My dandyism and yours are different. You people get

entangled in foppishness, but it does not affect me at all.' What he said was true. After a while, when he began to speak about God with some spiritual aspirants, he went into ecstasy. His fancy cloth became dishevelled and his slippers were cast aside.

Another day, while we were talking about a spiritual subject, he said suddenly, 'You see, my mother has come to take care of me. She lives in the Nabadhat.' I said, 'Your mother passed away a long time ago. How could she return?' He replied, 'You see, every woman in this world is my mother.' Then I realized that his wife had come. I said, 'You advise women that the main duty of a wife is to serve her husband. So she has come to serve you. You cannot deprive her of her duty.' Then he said, 'I have passed beyond that state. At any rate, I have asked her to serve me as much as she can from a distance.' I observed Sri Ramakrishna and realized that he truly had reached the state of perfection.

Another evening I visited him at Dakshineswar, and he welcomed me with great affection and gave me many wonderful spiritual instructions. His company was so pleasurable that it was hard to leave him. Meanwhile, the vesper service in the Kali temple began. For a long time I had cherished a desire to see that service. I said to him, 'Sir, I have a desire to see the vesper service of Kali with you.' He said, 'You are a Brahmo. Why do you want to see the vesper service of Kali?' [Brahmos do not approve of image worship.] I replied, 'There is no harm in watching it. Sir, please come. Let us go together.' He said, 'No, I shall not go. You go alone.' I said, 'Well, I am a Brahmo. Someone may say something, so I am requesting you to come with me.' He said, 'Leave your shoes at the bottom of the steps and then go to the temple. No one will say anything to you.' Following his instruction, I saw the vesper service and then returned to him. 'How was it?' he asked. I replied, 'It was beautiful.'

The next morning I was practising my spiritual disciplines and chanting some hymns while sitting on a beautiful terrace by the side of the Ganges. A man came and told me, 'Sri Ramakrishna is calling you.' When I reached him, he took his water pot

and said, 'Come with me.' I said, 'Sir, you are going to answer the call of nature. Why should I go with you?' He said, 'Just come with me.' I followed him. We left through the northern door of his room and then went to the Panchavati. He put his water pot on the ground and then stood, leaning on the circular brick platform. He related to me the stories of his highest spiritual experiences. Hearing them I had goose bumps all over my body.

Sri Ramakrishna was a god, so he told me this divine experience: 'Once at dead of night someone called me and said, "Please come to the bank of the Ganges. There you will see your cherished treasure." I followed him without delay to the bank of the Ganges. Again he said, "Come down a little and sit here." I sat there with eyes closed and felt an inexpressible bliss within. Then he said, "Now you see the long-desired result of your sadhana." I saw an effulgent Being who covered my heart and soul with an extraordinary divine light. After a while It disappeared. I then fervently prayed, "Will you not reveal yourself again?" I heard the response: "Whenever you call me, you will see me."'

When Sri Ramakrishna told me this story, tears trickled from his eyes. I was overwhelmed by the divine beauty of that perfected soul's face and sat down at his feet. Again he said, 'I can't describe that celestial beauty. I am truly blessed.' Let me remind my readers that it was definitely the vision of Brahman. Sri Ramakrishna was a yogi and an illumined soul. No one with a dogmatic outlook or guided by mere intellectual knowledge will be able to recognize this perfected soul.

In those days the relationship between Sri Ramakrishna and Keshab Chandra, Devendranath, and other great souls created a heavenly atmosphere in the Brahmo Samaj. Sri Ramakrishna gave spiritual advice to people of all sects. The sum and substance of his teachings were purity of character, truthfulness, simplicity, steadiness in action, service to human beings, and self-sacrifice. Through the influence of Sri Ramakrishna's teachings, his disciples renounced their parents, brothers and sisters, friends and family, and personal comfort, and


dedicated themselves to the service of humanity. They have established hospitals, orphanages, and ashramas all over India, and have received love and respect from the masses. Fifty years ago [the text was first published in 1921] I recorded in my diary some of Sri Ramakrishna's sayings, which I present here.

### Some Sayings of Sri Ramakrishna

Good and bad, righteous and unrighteous—all such descriptions pertain to jivas (individual souls). God is beyond both. For example, someone is reading the Bhagavata by the light of a lamp, and another is forging a legal document by the same light, but the lamp is unconcerned. The sun shines on the good as well as the wicked. You see, sorrow, sin,

and lack of peace are all connected with the jivas, but Brahman is completely detached. The snake has poison in its fangs. When it bites others they die, but that poison does not affect the snake at all.

Brahman is the only thing that is undefiled, because no one can describe what It is through words, which are spoken with the mouth. The Vedas, the Puranas, the Tantras, and other scriptures are all defiled because people read them uttering the words with their mouths.

After experiencing Brahman, one becomes silent. Until one has that experience, one must discriminate between the real and the unreal. As long as ghee is not hot enough, it makes a noise when something is dropped in it. But when it is hot, it does not make any sound. 

## A Dialogue with Brahmo Youth

C K: 'Why is Krishna painted dark?'

Ramakrishna: 'People suffer from the illusion of remoteness. The sky surrounds you. The sky is in the firmament. They are identical. The one is bright [clear]. The other looks blue. Take a near view of Krishna. Look him fully in the face. He is bright.'

C K: 'Is submission to a guru absolutely necessary for salvation?'

Ramakrishna: 'You wish to go to Hooghly. You may walk. You may hire a boat. You may take a passage in a steamer. The question is one of speed only. If you are in earnest, you will arrive at Hooghly. You may stop the boat at Serampore and return. You may halt there. You may jump into the river and die. Be earnest. Have no fear.'

C K: 'Which is better, to be a sannyasin or a householder?'

Ramakrishna: 'You have no choice. Your will is not free. A few men become sannyasins. The majority live as householders. Both kinds of life are difficult. People suppose the life of the grihastha is natural. Diversity is a divine law. Shukadeva was a true sannyasin. He was naked. Women bathing in the tank were not ashamed to look at him. They hid themselves in the water when his old father appeared. King Janaka played with two swords, one in each hand. He reconciled the two kinds of life. In

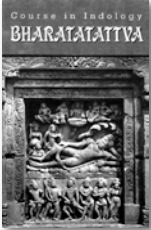
essence they are not conflicting. The great thing is to escape contamination—undue attachment to worldly interests. The Pankal fish lives in the mud. It is never soiled by it. Man is not a mere fish. He is surrounded by dirt, mud, venom, etc. How to live untouched by them? Milk poured into water loses its sweetness. It loses its nourishing power. Butter is untouched by water. Butter must be churned early in the morning. It is vain to churn milk for butter at midday. Grown-up trees are not spoiled by the cow. She browses the young sapling. It must be fenced. Make up your minds, my children, accordingly. Acidity is persistent. The sight of tamarind [which causes acidity] has a charm for one who suffers from it. A man may resolve to avoid tamarind. Resolution must be strong.

'The green coconut is filled with water. Shake it. (He brought his hands together against his left ear, as if he were shaking a coconut.) You hear no sound. The water, the shell, and the coir all seem to be one and the same body. Shake the ripe coconut. The water makes a sound. When completely dry, there is no water in the shell, and the kernel is separated from the shell. Shake it. The kernel gives a sound of its own. It says: "I live in the shell, but that shell does not contaminate me. I have freed myself from attachment."'

—Adapted from Kshirode Chandra Sen, 'How I Met Ramakrishna', *Prabuddha Bharata*, 37 (1932), 602–3.

# REVIEWS

For review in PRABUDDHA BHARATA,  
publishers need to send **two** copies of their latest publications.



## **Bharatatattva (Course in Indology): A Study Guide (Vols 1 and 2)**

Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Gol Park, Kolkata 700 029. E-mail: [rmic@vsnl.com](mailto:rmic@vsnl.com). Volume 1: 2004. 204 pp. Rs 50. Volume 2: 2006. xii + 348 pp. Rs 75.

Indology would, by any other name, sound as indefinable. Hence the change in nomenclature has not been of much help to the speakers or listeners of the talks contained in the two volumes. Indology is a term that has come into general currency, so the speakers for the Bharatatattva course continue to use it—and they are welcome to do so. Samiran Chandra Chakraborty rightly opines that we need not reject the term ‘Indology’ just because Western scholars coined it. So the presenters go ahead with the task apportioned to them and try to give us an idea of the foundations of Indian culture. Most of the lectures must have been interesting, as facts and opinions are conveyed as extended monologues. One is made constantly aware of an audience, and there must have been appropriate hand gestures, with grammar playing the truant. Thus Radharaman Chakrabarti: ‘But if you simply emphasise simple living and fail to emphasise the need of creature comforts you may fall in a trap. After all, are we not chasing the things of creature comfort? A television? A refrigerator? An air-conditioner? A fast moving train? And what not. These creature comforts—these are the manifestations of the success story of modern science and technology. Now, if the Indians wanted those things couldn’t they invent them?’ (1.29).

A good deal of information has been packed in these two volumes, but unfortunately they have not been blessed with a ruthless editor and a vigilant proofreader. Bratindranath Mukherjee’s ‘The States in India’ is an erudite talk on what constitutes a *rajya* and a *rashtra*, a state and a nation, but gets derailed repeatedly because of misprints—like ‘indicated’ for ‘indicted’ and ‘Mahanbharata’ for ‘Maha-bharata’. Sometimes the speaker seems wobbly in his

subject. When Narendra Nath Bhattacharya says that ‘*Shaiva Siddhanta* was the first book in which Shiva has been identified’, one must needs sigh in exasperation (2.203). Incidentally, he also assures us that the works of many Tamil Shaiva poets have been compiled in a book called *Telearang*. *Telearang*? He says that the works of Sundara, Sambandar, and Manikyavachika ‘have been collected in the *Muklibanam*’ (ibid.). *Muklibanam*? And how does one manage to keep a straight face with sentences like ‘Ritualistic barriers between divine thoughts were to some extent lowered by the *bhakti* movement and Sufism’ (1.49)?

Some speakers are elliptic and some bland. Satchidananda Dhar takes it easy even with such a fascinating subject as the Ramayana: ‘Rama is the ideal king of India. Sita is the ideal woman and wife, Lakshmana and Bharata are ideal brothers and Hanumana is ideal servant and friend. Characters of this epic are all national ideals’ (2.61).

Obviously that is all we need to know! Fortunately this has not been the attitude of most of the speakers. Brief but in

formative essays come from Narendra Nath Bhattacharya (‘Proprietary Rights of Indian Women in Ancient India’), Visvanath Chatterjee (‘Some Aspects of India Through the Western Lens’), Joy Bhattacharyya (‘Indian Materialism—A Brief Survey’), and Nirod Baran Chakraborty (‘Jainism’).

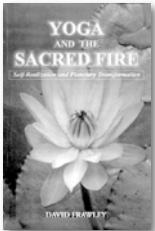
Plentiful inputs regarding India’s socio-political realities have been presented in Radharaman Chakrabarti’s eight talks. Unfortunately, all of them—as also the talks on the subject by others—remain Sanskrit-centric. There is absolutely nothing said regarding the Dravidian contribution to Indian culture, whereas ancient Tamil literature (as old as, if not older than Sanskrit literature) has vast ranges of information on monarchy, political administration, and religion. In fact, except for a bare reference to Tiruvalluvar and three bhakti poets, the great Sangam heritage has been ignored. This is very sad, for Dravidology has been an in-subject for nearly a century. Radharaman Chakrabarti has done well to call

upon the younger generations to show an increased interest in our heritage when he warns them against being misled by sloganeers and self-styled intellectuals. It is exciting to read of his coinage, 'comprador intellectuals': 'They act as the conduit of foreign ideas into our cognitive zones. We do have our own ways of thinking, our traditional way of thinking as also our present way of thinking. These are being gradually and subtly influenced by these *comprador intellectuals*. They bring in all sorts of ideas into our heads. I am not in favour of shutting them out, but my point is that we should carefully examine what they are trying to inject into our mind' (2.228). May it be a warning too, to the Bharatatattva course—lest its rejection of Dravidology invite the charge of 'comprador intellectuals' on the speakers published in these volumes. The course would be immensely enriched by encouraging its students to show enhanced interest in the Dravidian component of Indology as well.

Speaker after speaker tries to come to grips with the caste problem, but India's caste system has the last laugh. Fortunately, Swami Vivekananda gives a helping hand. Six talks on Sanskrit literature contain material that ought to inspire the younger generations—not an exhaustive introduction to the field, but enough to make some names like Magha and Shudraka familiar.

The initiators of the Bharatatattva course have meant well, but they need to plan a lot more and spend prime time with the execution of the project. We must remember that the publisher has won widespread renown for the *Cultural Heritage of India* volumes. Our expectations are high, and it would be wonderful if the future volumes in this series remember this and offer their best to the reading public.

Dr Prema Nandakumar  
Researcher and Literary Critic  
Srirangam



**Yoga and the Sacred Fire:  
Self-Realization and  
Planetary Transformation**

David Frawley

Motilal Banarsidass, 41 U A Bungalow  
Road, Jawahar Nagar, Delhi 110 007.  
2006. xviii + 291 pp. Rs 195.

**H**uman civilization is often supposed to have commenced with the invention of fire. It is the

use of fire that made it possible for human beings to give up a nomadic way of life and to establish communities. The story of human civilization is nothing but the development of human settlements, from villages to towns, cities, and nations.

The concept *fire* itself has a deeper meaning. Physics tells us that fire is the most subtle form of visible energy and dominates the physical world, so much so that an entire branch of physics called thermodynamics is devoted to it. Apart from this gross meaning, fire also has a subtle meaning, which covers all of human existence. It is the unravelling of the deeper meaning of fire that is the theme of this book.

The book commences with the study of the concept of *agni* as described in the Vedic texts. The very first mantra of the first mandala of the Rgveda is in praise of Agni. It is Agni who is the chief priest in any ritual sacrifice. He is also the messenger who conveys the essence of all oblations to the gods in the heavens. Without him a ritual sacrifice or *yajna* is impossible. There are innumerable Vedic mantras in praise of Agni, attesting to the prominent place accorded to it by Vedic culture.

Frawley then moves on to the manifestation of fire in the mineral, plant, and animal kingdoms. Agni represents consciousness present in all these forms of creation. But the most explicit manifestation is in the human realm. Frawley discusses these ideas in great detail, referring to the fire of intelligence, the gastric fire, the fire of breath, and even the presence of the fire principle in the human voice.

In an interesting interpretation, Frawley compares the eight limbs of Raja Yoga to eight fires and establishes a relationship between fire and yoga. This theme is further elaborated by incorporating concepts from Ayurveda. All yogic practices are linked to fire, because all of them should lead to the realization of the Divine Fire within us. The text closes with a discussion on a new planetary approach to yoga and the postulate of a new Sacred Fire, symbolizing a new consciousness.

The book encompasses within its pages a plethora of new ideas which ask to be explored in greater detail. In this sense, Frawley has opened up fresh paths for a reinterpretation of the Vedas and yoga. The book deserves serious study.

Dr N V C Swami

Dean of Academic Programmes

Swami Vivekananda Yoga Anusandhana Samsthana  
Bangalore



# REPORTS

## **Swami Vivekananda Birth Anniversary**

The birthday of Swami Vivekananda was celebrated at Belur Math on Tuesday, 29 January 2007. Thousands of devotees attended the celebration throughout the day, and cooked prasad was served to about 15,000 devotees. Srimat Swami Smarananandaji Maharaj, Vice President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, presided over the public meeting held in the afternoon.

## **National Youth Day**

Centres of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission celebrated National Youth Day on 12 January with processions, speeches, competitions, performances, and other events. Some important programmes are mentioned below:

Ramakrishna Mission, Belur Math, with Saradapitha (processions, speeches, recitations, music, audio-drama, yogasana demonstration); Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata (speeches, cultural competitions, music, drama); Agartala (public meeting addressed by the chief minister of Tripura); Bangalore (public meeting addressed by the governor of Karnataka); Bhubaneswar (national integration camp addressed by the governor of Orissa); Chandigarh (blood donation camp); Chennai Math (essay competition with about 121,000 participating youths from India, Sri Lanka, and Malaysia); Jamshedpur (youth convention); Madurai (essay competition with about 20,000 participating students from 151 schools and colleges); Malda (blood donation camp); Mangalore (headmasters' convention, youth convention); Nagpur (symposium); Narendrapur (public meeting addressed by Dr A P J Abdul Kalam, former president of India); Raipur (public meeting addressed by the governor of Chhattisgarh); Rajkot (processions, speeches, cultural competitions, and exhibitions in Rajkot, Adipur, Bhuj, and Upaleta); Sarisha (seminar); Shillong (seminar); Thiruvananthapuram (competitions in essay-writing, bhajan-singing, and other fields with about 1,200 participating students from 67 schools and colleges); Thrissur (seminar); Vadodara (youth convention).



*Reciting the 'swadesh mantra' on Youth Day at Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Patna*

## **News from Branch Centres**

A homoeopathic dispensary was inaugurated at **Ramakrishna Math, Palai**, on 30 December.

Srimat Swami Atmasthanandaji Maharaj, President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, unveiled a newly installed 12½-foot bronze statue of Swami Vivekananda at **Swami Vivekananda's Ancestral House, Kolkata**, on 1 January.

**Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission Sevashrama, Vrindaban**, conducted the concluding phase of its centenary celebrations from 11 to 16 January. Highlights included *vrindaban parikrama*, circumambulation of the holy city, by about 100 monks and 1,000 devotees; special worship; unveiling of the newly installed statue of Swami Vivekananda at the sevashrama by Swami Atmasthanandaji; release of a commemorative volume and an English edition of a book on Holy Vrindaban, public meetings addressed by Swami Atmasthanandaji, Swami Smarananandaji, Swami Prabhanandaji—General Secretary, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission—and several other distinguished persons; and pilgrimage tours for attendees. A special postal cover brought out by the Department of Posts, Government of India, was released. Also, the acquisition by the ashrama of the



*Vrindaban Parikrama*





*Kala Babu Kunj*

portion of Kala Babu Kunj where Sri Sarada Devi had stayed was announced. Cultural programmes were held on the first four days. About 180 monastics and 1,500 devotees attended the function.

**Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, Viveknagar**, organized two all-Tripura devotees' conferences on 20 December and 27 January, which were attended by 558 and 393 delegates.



*Dr Manmohan Singh visits a patient, Itanagar*

Dr Manmohan Singh, Prime Minister of India, accompanied by Sri Montek Singh Ahluwalia, Deputy Chairman, Planning Commission; Sri Mani Shankar Aiyer, Union Minister for Development of North Eastern Region; General (Rtd) J J Singh, Governor, Arunachal Pradesh; Sri Dorjee Khandu, Chief Minister, Arunachal Pradesh; Sri Prithviraj Chauhan, Minister of State in Prime Minister's Office, and several other dignitaries visited **Ramakrishna Mission Hospital, Itanagar**, on 31 January.

## **Relief**

Centres of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission conducted relief in the month of January 2008 as follows:

**Cyclone Relief** · Bangladesh: The Dhaka centre

continued extensive relief operations for thousands of people affected by Cyclone Sidr. During the last month, it distributed 117,500 kg rice, 200 sets of utensils, 1,491 saris, 1,353 lungis, 780 other garments, 15,029 blankets, and 36 hurricane lamps to 29,613 cyclone-affected families of Bagerhat, Barguna, Barisal, Bhola, Gopalganj, Khulna, Patuakhali, Pirojpur, and Satkhira districts. Also, tube wells were sunk in three villages of Barguna district. Relief work is continuing.

**Winter Relief** · During the last month, 16,649 blankets were distributed through the following centres to people affected by the severity of winter: Aalo (2,175), Agartala (200), Belgaum (200), Belgharia (499), Cherrapunjee (2,000), Garbeta (100), Gol Park (500), Limbdi (150), Patna (4,000), Puri Mission (2,000), Purulia (1,000), Rajkot (95), Ramharipur (1,500), Saradapitha (300), Sargachhi (900), Shyamla Tal (30), Vrindaban (1,000). Winter garments were distributed as follows: Limbdi (150 sweaters), Rajkot (54 sweaters), Ramharipur (200 shawls), Shyamla Tal (sweaters, mufflers, and caps to 300 school children).

**Flood Relief** · Muzaffarpur: medical treatment to 2,076 persons of 10 villages in Muzaffarpur, Saran, and Vaishali districts; Patna: 3,431 blankets and 364 assorted garments to people of 6 blocks in Darbhanga, Muzaffarpur, and Samastipur districts. Belgharia: 1,890 biscuit packets, 1,248 saris, 1,505 dhotis, 1,338 shirts, and 1,464 frocks to 3,290 flood-affected people of six blocks in North 24-Parganas, South 24-Parganas, East and West Medinipur districts, and Belgharia in Kolkata; relief work is continuing.

**Pilgrimage Service** · Ramakrishna Mission Seva Pratishthan organized a round-the-clock medical relief camp during Makar Sankranti Mela at Sagar Island in South 24-Parganas district from 10 to 15 January. A total of 4,402 persons were treated, out of which 34 received indoor medical care. Also, 125 blankets were distributed to poor pilgrims and monks. Manasadwip centre arranged board and lodging facilities for 850 pilgrims at residential camps in the Mela area and at the ashrama.

**Distress Relief** · The following centres distributed various items to persons of nearby areas. Aalo: 1,649 mosquito nets; Belgaum: 500 saris; Chandigarh: 151 garments; Patna: 4,000 saris and dhotis, and 20,000 other garments; Ramharipur: 2,000 saris and dhotis, and 250 sets of children's garments; Ulsoor: 2,000 saris.